

Exposition and Elaboration

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CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS OF  
PRESS POLICY AND PRESS OPERATIONS;  
AN ILLUSTRATION OF MISLEADING PRESS POLICIES

By

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The Vietnam War should have been the <sup>best</sup> reported war in the nation's history. The press certainly invested more money, assigned more correspondents and cameramen, devoted more space, time and effort to this war than it had to any other major conflict in recent times. Countless millions were spent by the networks alone each year to finance their coverage of the war, while the print media spent nearly as much. And at one point some 500 correspondents, representing every major news organization in the world, were based in the war zone. These legions of reporters, most of them American, covered the conflict with tremendous enterprise and initiative, usually risking their lives in the process.

The press in Vietnam also had nearly unprecedented freedom to investigate and report. As a matter of routine policy, the top U.S. military commanders extended almost every conceivable courtesy and privilege to reporters and cameramen. Thus, they could go almost anywhere, see almost anything, and could rely on the U.S. military to get them there and back. In fact, fewer restrictions were placed on the press in this war than perhaps in any other war in which the United States had ever been involved.

But somehow this entire effort was mostly in vain for after all that has been said and written, Vietnam remains the most misunderstood war of our times. Much of the blame for this lack of understanding and general bewilderment must rest with the American press.

Perhaps the basic problem was the almost fanatical obsession of the press with the spectacle rather than the substance of the war. The reporters invariably seemed to concentrate on the dramatic, sensational, but basically superficial aspects of the conflict. It was "blood and guts" coverage in the best tradition of World War II, but only rarely did the press show either insight into the complexities of the War or profound understanding of the realities of the situation. Most of the time the press simply followed the basic military approach to the War and that in turn inhibited any serious attempts to criticize the official effort. And this essentially superficial coverage of the War coupled with an uncritical acceptance of the official view tended to reinforce the credibility of official U.S. Government policies and strategy. Undoubtedly strong patriotic feelings were a compelling factor throughout, nevertheless the press largely failed to develop a broad perspective of its own on the War, and almost completely failed to inform the nation of the existence of more effective, alternative policies. But if the press had been more conscientious and alert, more knowledgeable and incisive, perhaps even more cynical, the U.S. Government might have been faced with a far better informed public, and as a result the history of the past five years might have been substantially different.

This critique, however, can apply only to the performance of the press after the intervention in 1965, not before, for in the early 1960's the press was neither timid, nor complacent nor uncritical of the U.S. Government effort. In fact, it was aggressive, highly critical and strongly skeptical

of just about everything the Government was saying on the subject of progress in the War. But, of course, it was a much different war then: the conflict was still rather limited, the issues were relatively clear-cut, deception and incompetence were fairly easy to detect. Most importantly, U.S. troops were not directly involved. The official United States role was largely advisory and there were consequently fewer psychological, emotional or bureaucratic pressures on reporters to practice self-censorship. And in these circumstances, press seemed to find it easier to cultivate a certain degree of objectivity and detachment about the bitter struggle, and to expose mistakes and failures where they existed.

Once U.S. combat troops began dying in Vietnam in large numbers, and once the War had become a major domestic political issue, the press inevitably became less candid and aggressive. But in the initial stages of the conflict it was evident to almost everyone, except the U.S. Government, that the situation was not going well, although during these early years the press in Saigon rarely relied on the Government for much of anything beyond transport out to the field. Moreover, by 1963 there was almost no question as to how the War was going. Buddhist monks were burning themselves to death on Saigon street corners, some of the better American advisors were quitting in disgust and President Diem--gradually losing control of the situation--came to resemble a paranoid Mandarin on a somewhat tarnished throne.

In the early days covering Vietnam required energy, patience, keen intelligence and, in many ways, the story and reporters made a good match. What the reporters lacked in patience and politeness they more than made up for with a fierce determination to track down the story and challenge the complacency of the U.S. bureaucracy. Under different conditions their rebellious and often courageous prose might have been far more controlled, but the press corps realized it was venturing onto relatively virgin territory and understood all the freedom the situation allowed.

The press corps also benefited from the fact that its readership was interested in Vietnam, but not passionately involved. During those early days Vietnam was actually no more than a fascinating sideshow to the Cold War dramas going on in Berlin and Cuba. So with the nation's attention primarily focused on those two areas, vested interests and emotional prejudices on Vietnam were at a minimum, and reporters were free to choose their targets without much fear of offending anyone. Basically the nation was more curious about Vietnam than anything else. Pacification and counterinsurgency were, after all, new terms that had just made their first prominent appearance in the general vocabulary. Guerrilla warfare was something few understood, even at the White House. And generally speaking, those who were interested in Vietnam were intrigued, trying consciously to be objective and willing to listen to the press with an open mind.

The credibility of the press was further enhanced by its running battle with the Administration over progress in the War. The Administration was saying one thing about the situation in Vietnam, not surprisingly the press was saying quite another. It was clear the public tended to believe the press rather than the Government as most interested readers seemed completely ready to believe that the Government was engaged in yet another losing venture. If the circumstances had been different however, and the United States

had been totally committed, then the public would surely have been under much greater psychological pressure to "rally-round-the-flag," as later events would show.

The fact that most of the reporters in the early days were newcomers to Vietnam was curiously more of an advantage than a disadvantage. They had brought few preconceived ideas with them to Saigon, they had fresh insights, and they had no bitter reminiscences of the past. They were primarily eager to see and learn, and the opportunities for field investigation were unparalleled, enabling the press to get closer to the real situation in Vietnam than it would for the rest of the decade.

For the most part, this realistic view of the situation was purely accidental as the orientation of the press only reflected the priorities of the Government. And American activities at this time were focused on ARVN, pacification and village security; in other words, those problems that have been the most critical and basic issues throughout the war. There was no fundamental disagreement between the press and the U.S. Government (or indeed, inside the Government itself) on the importance of these problems. The controversy was over the effectiveness of U.S. policies directed at those problems and the competence of the Vietnamese to solve them. But since the U.S. was still not totally committed, there was far less pressure on being cautious and "fair," and instead there was a tremendous incentive on being objective and even bold. Indeed, as long as American combat troops were not dying by the thousands in a "dirty" Asian jungle war, members of the press enjoyed considerable freedom to speak their mind, which they did with disturbing regularity. Homer Bigart of The New York Times--a gifted writer and a sensitive reporter--was a perfect example. He repeatedly filed pessimistic but accurate reports on the situation that thoroughly enraged the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. John Mecklin, a journalist himself who was head of USIS during the last years of the Diem regime, has an amusing reference to this in his published recollections of that period.

At a meeting in Washington, a "negative" story by Homer Bigart in The New York Times was under discussion. A senior official cracked that "Mr. Bigart spells his name wrong," meaning that it should be "bigot." Everyone laughed. Among newspapermen, Bigart was one of the most respected men in the trade.\*

Bigart's final report on Vietnam only reconfirmed his earlier views. Entitled "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem," and written on his return from Saigon in the summer of 1962, Bigart concludes with a prophetic warning to the Administration to avoid the obvious temptation of sending U.S. combat troops into Vietnam.

No one who has seen conditions of combat in South Vietnam would expect conventionally trained U.S. forces to fight any better against Communist guerrillas than did the French

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\*John Mecklin, Mission in Torment (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 114.

in their seven years of costly and futile war. For despite the talk here of training men for jungle warfare, of creating counter-guerrillas who can exist in forests and swamps and hunt down the Vietcong, Americans may simply lack the endurance and the motivation to meet the unbelievably tough demands of jungle fighting.\*

This first generation of Vietnam correspondents also produced several excellent books on the conflict that have stood the test of time remarkably better than most of the bureaucratic reports of that period. One of the best of these books, The Making of a Quagmire, written by David Halberstam (of The New York Times), explains in detail why the journalists were far better observers than the professional analysts and diplomats. Halberstam's thesis, supported by most other thoughtful observers, maintains that free expression and objectivity were almost effectively stifled by a tyrannical bureaucratic system that considered anything but undiluted optimism as intolerable.

Halberstam and his colleagues were, of course, under no such constraints and were free not only to write as they saw fit but also to concentrate on essentials. For the most part, they were relieved of the burden of covering daily events in Vietnam, and thus could ignore much of the trivia that would seem so important later. Instead they devoted their energies to writing what virtually amounts to current history. To be sure, much of what they did write was trivial, perhaps irrelevant, and somewhat unbalanced, but the standard of reportage in that period has generally been recognized as far superior to the journalistic output of later years.

Even some Government officials have been forced to concede that point. John Mecklin, for instance, head of USIS during the last years of the Diem period, was plagued throughout his time in Saigon by the press and its running battle with the Government. And in his recollections of that period, Mecklin writes that the press corps then was not "lovable, much less faultless." But he also says that responsibility for the press-Government relationship was not all one-sided, and that the press was far better than most Government officials were willing to admit.

For the most part the policy-makers in Washington and Saigon were fifteen or twenty years older than the resident newsmen. They had devoted their careers to military or diplomatic service in a good many countries, through a good many crises. They were understandably resentful of the brash young newsmen who presumed the right to sit in judgment. This, however, was the nature of the species. American newsmen, whatever their age, are often brash and hard to live with. This is one reason why Americans are the best-informed people in the world. The burden of the blame for the mess in Saigon must therefore lie with the officials who tried to reform the American press

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\*Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem," The New York Times, July 25, 1962.



from the other side of the world instead of learning to live with it, who were old enough and who should have been sophisticated enough to know better. This was particularly true in view of the subsequent evidence that the "immature" newsmen were better judges of what was happening in Vietnam than the supposedly seasoned experts.\* (Emphasis added.)

Mecklin was not alone in paying tribute, however qualified, to members of the American press corps in Vietnam. Two of them, in fact, dominated the 1963 awards for journalistic excellence. Halberstam, the most famous of these "young Turks," shared the Pulitzer Prize that year with his colleague and friend Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press. For some reason, however, the Pulitzer Committee passed over the third member of this group, Neil Sheehan, then of United Press International, whom Mecklin praised in particular for his outstanding energy, ingenuity and personal integrity. While the younger correspondents monopolized the major journalism awards that year, the older correspondents in this group were no less capable or talented. Charles Mohr, for example, originally went to Vietnam for Time-Life and filed some magnificent reports on the discouraging prospects. As his reward he was either overruled or ignored by his home office, forcing him to quit in disgust, join The New York Times and become one of its top foreign correspondents.

By the time the escalation began in 1965, however, almost all the veterans of the Diem days were on their way to new assignments. In their place came hordes of reporters and cameramen who were, for the most part, not nearly as talented or perspicacious. Most of them knew little about the country, its people or the past history of the War. Nor, perhaps, did many of them care. They had come to Vietnam to cover the dramatic American buildup and they were already intoxicated by this tremendous spectacle. But few realized that this obsession with the awesome U.S. military presence would radically affect the perspective of the press, distort its sense of priorities and compromise its very effectiveness.

The most immediate result of the American buildup on both the press and the Government itself was a revolution in perspective. With more and more troops arriving, the war had now irrevocably become an American war being fought by American troops. The basic character of the conflict had, of course, not changed but the priorities and sense of values of the press, as well as the Government, had been revolutionized, and not for the better. There were at least two and possibly three different wars going on in Vietnam at the time and the press, reflecting only the official outlook, had no doubts about which struggle deserved first priority--the big-unit war between the United States and the North Vietnamese. Naturally everything else was secondary, including South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese.

By concentrating almost exclusively on the American effort the press was, in effect, taking a one-dimensional view of a multi-dimensional problem. Predictably this led to highly superficial coverage that had little

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\*John Mecklin, op. cit., p. 124.

depth and few insights. But while the press as a whole increasingly lost touch with the reality of Vietnam, the reporters themselves were not entirely to blame. Between the frantic effort to keep up with the troops and the maddening pressure of constant deadlines, reporters had few opportunities to reflect and analyze. The same was obviously true in the Government. As Sir Robert Thompson recently observed, "With the introduction of a seven-day, sixty-hour week in all American headquarters no one was given any time to think." By the late 1960's, in fact, the conflict had expanded so radically and become so confusing that editors were led to devoting most available resources to the obvious, which resulted in a tremendous decrease in opportunities for more thoughtful reporting or intensive field investigation. The recollections of one reporter, and later Saigon bureau chief, for one of the major American media provides an illustration "I remember one time during the early 1960's when I told one of our people to go down to Usom and then get out into the provinces. As he started to leave I made it quite plain that I didn't want to see him for at least two weeks. Of course, it turned out to be a richly rewarding project but as the years went by there were less and less possibilities, and fewer demands, for that type of reporting. For one thing I didn't have the manpower to spare and even if I did it wouldn't have been used. They just didn't seem to be interested."

So by force of circumstances and expediency, most reporters found themselves dividing their time between Saigon and the U.S. troops in the field with few other diversions in between. Obviously this did not encourage much informed coverage of Vietnam but it was vigorously argued that there were other factors to be considered. The standard argument went something to the effect that there were more urgent and immediate priorities, there wasn't enough manpower to spare, no one back home was really interested in anything except the "big-bang" war, and finally that American troops were actually winning the war. Any conscientious reporter who attempted to defy the formidable logic of this system was also forced to perform the often herculean feat of saying something meaningful in the limited space or time that was normally made available. But talent aside, there was only so much any writer could say in a thousand words in a newspaper, a short column in a magazine, or two minutes on television.

Of course, there were many occasions when reporters were given the opportunity to write longer, more thoughtful pieces on some of the basic issues in the war. Although these opportunities were far too rare, some of the more incisive Vietnam dispatches represented journalism at its best. Charles Mohr, for example, returned to Vietnam for The New York Times during the 1965 buildup and consistently filed some excellent pieces throughout the remaining years of the decade. Robert Shaplen was perhaps the most outstanding example of thoughtful journalism, but then he enjoyed an obvious advantage by virtue of the extraordinary privilege granted him to devote two months (or more) for researching and writing his "Letter from Saigon" to the prestigious New Yorker magazine. Significantly, both Shaplen and Mohr were Vietnam veterans of long-standing and--as a general rule--the veterans always seemed to have a far greater insight into the war. Neil Sheehan, somewhat younger than either Shaplen or Mohr, was

another talented member of this group who first made his reputation during the initial stages of the war. Of all his reports, however, an article entitled "Not a Dove But No Longer a Hawk" was perhaps the best. This was Sheehan's valedictory to Vietnam and it demonstrated the contribution that could be made by a sensitive reporter, if given the chance.

Although I often disagreed with the implementation of American policy during my first two years in Vietnam, I was in accord with its basic aims...While there are some patriotic and decent individuals among them, most of the men who rule Saigon have, like the Bourbons, learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They seek to retain what privileges they have to regain those they lost.

For its own strategic and political ends, the United States is thus protecting a Non-communist Vietnamese social structure that cannot defend itself and that perhaps does not deserve to be defended. Our responsibility for prolonging what is essentially a civil conflict may be one of the major reasons for the considerable amount of confusion, guilt and soul searching among Americans over the Vietnam War...

The moral degeneration caused by the G.I. culture that has mushroomed in the cities and towns is another malady...I have sometimes thought, when a street urchin with sores covering his legs, stopped me and begged for a few cents worth of Vietnamese piastres that he might be better off growing up as a political commissar. He would then, at least, have some self-respect...

In World War II and Korea Americans fought as they always like to think they fought--for human freedom and dignity. In Vietnam, this moral superiority has given way to the amorality of great power politics, specifically to the problem of maintaining the United States as the paramount power in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese people have become mere pawns in the struggle...

But I simply cannot help worrying that, in the process of waging this war, we are corrupting ourselves. I wonder when I look at the bombed out peasant hamlets, the orphans begging and stealing on the streets of Saigon, and the women and children with napalm burns lying on the hospital cots, whether the United States has the right to inflict this suffering and degradation on another people for its own ends. And I hope we will not, in the name of some anti-communist crusade, do this again.\*

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\*Neil Sheehan, "Not a Dove But No Longer a Hawk," The New York Times Magazine, October 9, 1966.



Frank McCulloch of Time-Life was another member of the press corps who first arrived as the Diem regime neared its final collapse and stayed through the big buildup. In 1967 as he prepared to leave Vietnam and accept a new assignment, McCulloch delivered his own farewell to the War he had chronicled for four long years.

It is true enough, as General Westmoreland and others have said, that there is no stalemate in Vietnam, that in every dimension of the conflict, measurable progress is being made. But after four years of exposure to Vietnam, I know that without amplification the statement means a very great deal--and next to nothing. The meaning lies in how much progress is being made, in what areas and to what lasting effect...

This being the case, the debate must properly focus not on bombing pauses, or on our presumed credibility before the world, or even on whether we should be in Vietnam or not, but on the rate of progress and what this implies.

These questions must be asked:

1. At the current or foreseeable rate of progress, how long will the struggle continue.
2. At what cost in money and blood.
3. For what reason...\*

But despite the few moments of glory that may have been thrown their way, thoughtful reporters were endlessly troubled by a sense of frustration and inadequacy. Every time, or almost every time, these reporters attempted to provide some perspective to the story their suggestions were ignored or rejected. The press establishment--especially in the States--was simply too American-oriented, or too Saigon-oriented, to permit many distractions from what they considered the major story of the Vietnam War. Stories on rural development in Vietnam suffered the most, and the specific affliction in this case was commonly called the "My g-d, not another pacification story" syndrome. One reporter recalling some examples of this remarked that "we tried to push stories on the Vietnamese, on the other war, but all we got in reply was a loud yawn. And there was a general belief that this lack of interest was also true for the readership."

Vietnam-based correspondents also learned quickly that any serious attempts to question basic U.S. policy or challenge accepted military strategy would be futile. In some cases the correspondent's report was not only ignored but directly contradicted by what his organization ultimately said in print. A recent article in Esquire, on Time and Newsweek magazines, provides an excellent illustration. The specific incident typified some of the problems and frustrations faced by Frank McCulloch during his years as Time-Life bureau chief in Saigon.

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\*Frank McCulloch, "A Farewell to Vietnam," Life Magazine, December 15, 1967.

'One time they asked us to file for a cover story on the American buildup,' recalls Art Zich, a Time correspondent in Saigon from 1965-7 and now an editor with Newsweek. 'When the story came out, it had a cover slash (a diagonal headline across the top) of something like "Turning Point in Vietnam" and it read like, you know Yippie! the Yanks are coming and we're going to show those little fellows how to do it! There was no suggestion of that whatsoever in our files. We just said the buildup was the beginning of a long, long fight. McCulloch, according to Zich, 'felt a deep personal anguish. He felt the magazine was leading the public in the wrong direction and he tried to keep the bureau from falling apart.'\*

Another former Vietnam correspondent, an experienced journalist with a very distinguished reputation, argues that few people in the United States really wanted to understand, or perhaps could understand, the basic issues in the conflict. Otherwise, he maintains, there would have been greater comprehension and acceptance of press reports from Vietnam attacking the basic weaknesses in the U.S. strategy. At the same time, he strongly disagrees with those who contend the press made no valuable criticism of U.S. policies and strategies.

It was there. There were several reporters who were probing beneath the surface, who were writing meaningful copy. I can think of several offhand. Bernie Weinraub of The New York Times, Ward Just of The Los Angeles Times, Lee Lescaze of the Washington Post. But I don't think the public ever realized this stuff was published, or maybe they just didn't care. Vietnam was an important story basically only as a domestic issue while anything from Vietnam itself turned them off. Nixon knows that, Wallace knows that. All that the public was interested in was the "big-bang" war and that required little understanding. However, the war in its entirety, as a whole, was at least a four-dimensional problem that seemed to be so complex no one wanted to hear about it.

Moreover, there was this unshakable belief in the U.S. that we were invincible. Let me give you an example. In the fall of 1965, I guess it was, one of our top executives came out to Vietnam to see the buildup for himself. For the first five days everyone in the bureau briefed him as thoroughly as possible, and we took him around in an attempt to show him some of the complexities of the war. Then we flew to Camranh Bay and we went up in a chopper to get a good look at the whole area. Even in those early days Camranh was a pretty impressive sight and there was evidence all around us of the tremendous potential of American industrial technology,

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\*Chris Welles, "Newsweek (a fact) is the New Hot Book (an opinion)," Esquire, November 1969, p. 246.

organizational capabilities and U.S. military power. The only problem was that it was all a non-sequitur. In any event, while we were up there, this executive turned around to me and said 'You know, we should bring the top five Viet Cong leaders here, give them this same chopper ride, and I'll bet that after seeing what we've just seen, all this American power, they'd promptly give up the fight.' I just sat there stunned realizing that everything we had tried to tell him in the past five days had simply not registered. And, shortly after he returned home, we predictably published a major piece saying the war was being won!\*

There were few Americans anywhere who could believe that the United States was somewhat less than omnipotent on the Vietnam battlefields. For obvious reasons, the American military machine in Vietnam inspired false confidence in the minds of even the most skeptical. In a more balanced picture of the Vietnam conflict, the inadequacies in the military effort would have been far more apparent but unfortunately the press (as well as the Government) was not always committed to the broad perspective. Those few who knew the villages of Vietnam as well as its battlefields, who knew its peasants as well as its educated elite, were not at all impressed by the spectacle, but they were distinctly in the minority. Those who were less well informed could only base their judgments on subjective thinking, for what other alternative existed when the capriciousness of the press reports was equaled only by the ambiguity of Government proclamations? All in all, it seemed to be a hopelessly confused war without an end, without a policy or a strategy, and where the mood changed more often than the succession of South Vietnamese governments. The press, as bewildered as anyone else, seemed to believe everyone, had little faith in anyone, but reflected in its often contradictory reports whatever mood happened to be current at the time.

Constantly bombarded by both the press and the Government with contradictory information and opinion, the public retreated from the controversy and fell back on subjective opinion or personal bias to assess the war. Believing, in many cases, only what it wanted to believe, it was unable to believe, on the other hand, the pessimistic reports, while often too skeptical to accept the optimistic reports. In other words, the public gradually came to the point where it didn't know who to believe and decided to consider all sources of information as suspect. In its heart, the public wanted to believe that the U.S. was winning but its collective mind was far too confused by the increasing complexity of the problem to concentrate on anything but the most simplistic solutions to the war.

Having developed no real perspective of its own, the press certainly contributed to this general confusion by its promiscuous support of the most reasonable, or most fashionable, opinions of the moment. As confused

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\*This was told the writer in a personal interview.

as anyone else, the press found all the evidence so contradictory, ambiguous or ephemeral that it felt obliged to give the benefit of the doubt to any reasonable views, including the military's. Even some acknowledged experts on Vietnam, such as Douglas Pike of USIS, found themselves faced with this serious dilemma. Pike has often been referred to as the leading American expert on the Viet Cong, but in the introduction to his latest book he describes the common frustration of trying to assess the situation in Vietnam.

Vietnam defies simplification. At the vortex, Saigon, the complexity is greatest, the view most personal. Even after eight years one cannot leave Vietnam with any Great Truth Concluded unless one is simple-minded or the servant of some interest other than truth (we've had more than our share of both). I flew out of Saigon dozens of times during the war and always, at take-off, with the same thoughts:

That in my latest stay I'd had no increment of wisdom, that at best I had managed to maintain a cool objective view, suspecting at the time that objectivity may reflect, not sagacity, only uncertzinty.

That once again I was leaving behind a place of pluses and minuses, of goods and bads (all, I cheerfully admit, measured by my own yardstick), of paradoxes and imponderables, leaving again with the tinge of sadness that comes in moments of reflection on the plight of the Vietnamese people, on one's own sins of omission, on the passage of time.

That beyond a few facts about Vietnam that I cart around like an attache case, all else hangs in a smog of relativity. One concludes that to leave heartened or sympathetic or revengeful or full of despair depends only slightly on where you where you were, for how long, or what you experienced in Vietnam; it indicates only baggage that you brought with you...

Raw opinion on Vietnam is cheap and largely worthless. Even straight facts are of limited value. Of course, to understand Vietnam it is necessary to collect data, but the fumbling comes in isolating important fact from the welter of trivia, in distilling the data into meaning. The materials consist of past and present events, our opinion of them, the ideal of what might be. The task of those of us who write about Vietnam is to relate the reality of the war to the logic of our experience. Herein lies the gulf. Vietnam has become the great intellectual tragedy of our times. Why this is so I do not understand. Living in Vietnam for eight years has contributed nothing to my enlightenment. The story of Vietnam has not been told, not even its beginnings. Perhaps it must be told from somewhere else. But non-fiction is the wrong medium. My greatest despair is that the story may never be told the way

It was. Even as I write, I must admit that my strongest feeling toward Vietnam remains puzzlement....\*

World War II, by comparison, was the epitome of clarity. There was never any misunderstanding or confusion about either Allied or German objectives and strategy while progress in the war was easy to see. In Vietnam, however, American policy was not only ambiguous and without any reliable standard for measuring progress but, to the press and public the United States often seemed to be fighting a "phantom" enemy whose strategy was unclear and who was both infuriatingly elusive and mysterious. In short, Vietnam was not only complex but confusing, vague, misleading, even aimless. More so, because what had been virtually unthinkable only a short time before was suddenly--or so it seemed--the lead item on that day's MACV releases while the phenomenon of the world's richest nation making such a huge commitment to one of the world's poorest nations was simply too complex to grasp.

Moreover, what effects this tremendous American presence was actually having on the war from 1965 onward was never entirely clear because the reality of Vietnam was equally confused. The press could provide little clarification for it, too, had become separated from reality by its own narrow perspective, by its preoccupation with the sensational, and by its reliance on the opinions and views of others. The press could also do little to reconcile the military's claims of progress with the critics' counter-claims, or Administration statements on negotiations with the position of the dissenters. The press could not even provide an accurate evaluation of the situation in Vietnam without consulting at least a half dozen sources who all had their own personal prejudices, biases, and conflicting views. The resulting confusion was so great that action became a widespread substitute for thought, as William Pfaff of Hudson Institute observed in a privately circulated journal written during a 1967 visit to Vietnam. Describing the mood of the Americans in Vietnam, Pfaff wrote, "Here nearly everyone is numbed by complexity and has fallen back on action, which is unambiguous."

Much of this confusion must be attributed to the corrupting effect of JUSPAO and the huge U.S. public relations machine. Their endless briefings and books of statistics, though generally received with sarcastic skepticisms, made it irresistible not to take the easy way out. Slowly, without realizing it, the media allowed the influence of the U.S. Government to become so strong that lead items in the press and on television were largely determined by MACV news releases or by the actions of the big U.S. combat units, and not by the realities of the war. Invariably the press placed the greatest emphasis on what the U.S. Mission (and this, of course, includes the military) had done on any given day rather than on what the U.S. had not done. Also, the news media all

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\*Douglas Pike, War, Peace and the Viet Cong (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969), pp. V-VII.



suffered from an inherent inclination to judge events by their significance within the very narrow time span of 24 hours or 7 days. And since the news media thrive on novelty to retain their audience, the daily activities of the U.S. military not only provided the ideal elements for this proven commercial formula but were essentially the only aspect of the War which fit their conceptions of what the American public, as a whole, understood or wanted.

Of course, the press did not totally abdicate its responsibility either to think for itself or to criticize. However, its distorted perspective of the war immensely enhanced the credibility of the official rationale for U.S. policies and strategies. The sheer force of official arguments were reinforced over time by constant repetition and inevitably came to dominate the outlook of the press. At the same time, however, the press seemed to feel instinctively that the logic underlying U.S. policies was entirely wrong. But the widespread confusion, and their lack of experience with this kind of complex war seemingly blinded them to any of the other alternatives. In a recent issue, Time magazine described this process, about as well as anyone else has, in commenting on the battle for Hamburger Hill. "As so often before in the baffling, complicated war (the military case) was easy to fault, but lacking in reference to points to reality on which reasonable men might agree."

Escaping from this web of official logic and rationale would have involved a revolution in the attitudes and outlook of the press, something which the press itself was unwilling to undergo. There were simply too many pressures working against this. The system, if it could be called that, was too formidable an obstacle to give way to a few voices virtually crying out in the wilderness. Nor did the men who run the great news media of the U.S. see any need for a radically new outlook since they apparently did not know Vietnam or simply did not care. Like the directors of all powerful enterprises and institutions, these men were essentially conservative, essentially patriotic, and while willing to permit criticisms of certain aspects of the effort they could not bring themselves to denounce the effort as a whole. For one thing, many of them believed in it. The President of the United States, regardless of who he is, is not to be entirely disbelieved. Neither is a four-star general. In short, the government may not be brilliant but it seemed impossible--for the press or the public--to believe that it was entirely incompetent. Or put another way, the press had joined the system, adopted the official outlook, and acknowledged the progress that was being made without considering its significance. Complacency reigned.

The environment in Saigon, and throughout the U.S. military establishment in Vietnam, tremendously reinforced this universal psychology--although the moment the press moved beyond that perimeter the reporter's outlook usually changed considerably. The system, however, strongly discouraged many such independent initiative and so, for the most part, the press devoted its major efforts to covering the U.S. military, and inevitably spent most of its time with the military. Caught up as they were in this military environment, and in the day-to-day developments of the War, the press gradually began to accept much of the military logic and rationale.

Needless to say, the press obviously couldn't cover the entire war itself and so it was also dependent on the military for background, information, guidance, and for what was jokingly referred to in Vietnam as the "big picture." But the relationship went even further. Throughout much of Vietnam the press and the military lived right next to each other, flew on the same flights, ate in the same mess halls and frequently spent their free hours together. This familiarity did often lead to mutual contempt but it rarely provoked widespread criticism because the reporters were far more influenced by the military approach to the conflict than most of them would ever care to admit. They practically couldn't resist it. This was equally true for both reporters as well as for senior editors on whirlwind, red-carpeted tours. Making matters even worse was the inclination of the military outlook towards optimism above all else. Official confirmation (of sorts) to this effect was provided one time in Manila, by no less an authority than Robert Komer. At the time, Komer had not yet received his permanent appointment to the Saigon Mission and had come out to Vietnam from the White House to compile a report for the President. A large group of reporters caught up with him in Manila and began pressuring him to admit that the war was not going nearly as well as he was reportedly telling Washington. In reply, Komer reportedly said, "Gentlemen, I've finally put my finger on your main error. Contrary to what you may think, I was doing a report on progress in the war, not on the lack of it." And this same attitude prevailed on almost every level of the U.S. Establishment in Vietnam.

In retelling this very interesting tale, a reporter who spent many years in Vietnam pointed out, "It's very hard to say I've been taken. And that is something I was able to do only afterwards. When I was actually in Vietnam I received privileged treatment. Anytime I wanted to see Westmoreland I could. And I liked Westmoreland and his staff immensely. They were decent, good people, and they were extremely good to me. But you're really kidding yourself if you don't think this influences how you file. In retrospect, I must admit I was paying a price for this access to the brass." As the experience of this reporter suggests, the Government invariably has the advantage in this often close, and sometimes parasitic, relationship between the official bureaucracy and the press. Regardless of the reporter's instinctive skepticism and suspicion, he is almost forced to rely on his contacts in the bureaucracy for information, guidance, and of course for "inside" information. This was especially true in Vietnam where there was a great premium on "inside" information and where most of the press had little knowledge or background in military affairs and tactical warfare. As a result, the press was constantly looking to contacts in the military for guidance, more information, background and analysis to make their reports more comprehensible and authoritative. The press did not always acknowledge this dependence to themselves or to their readers, but many reporters did indeed write with great restraint simply because they felt incompetent to evaluate U.S. military tactics and strategy. So the press tried to provide some perspective to their reports by using the time-honored technique of quoting the opinions of a variety of "well-informed military sources," which most editors prefer anyway as the only proven way to keep their reporters' opinions out of the news columns and still balance straight factual reporting (if there is such a thing) with responsible analysis.

Many reporters in Vietnam tacitly agreed. Sitting on the outside looking in, these reporters knew they were at a disadvantage, recognized their lack of expertise, and felt the only logical alternative was to give the benefit of the doubt to the supposedly better informed Government officials. It takes great presence of mind and considerable self-confidence on the part of a reporter to challenge a high Government official, especially a four-star general, who always has access to more information and uses this to great advantage in impressing the reporter with his knowledge and expertise, while reinforcing this with inevitably well-prepared arguments.

After a while most reporters in Vietnam (although by no means all) established close relationships with several officials that often developed into strong personal friendships, and this understandably tended to strengthen the bonds between the press and the Mission, while making the reporters even more hesitant about attacking basic U.S. policy in Vietnam. Of course, antagonism between the press and the Mission existed but most reporters who regularly saw the same Government officials every week inevitably began questioning their own thoughts on the war, and often tended--as a result--to be more sympathetic to the Government's point of view.

This attitude may have been even more prevalent among the high and mighty of the press establishment than among the hired hands. In the executive suites of the major American news organizations where policy is made, many of the top editors tended to believe--if they were not already convinced--that the U.S. was winning the war, however slowly. Many top editors also undoubtedly felt that it would be unpatriotic to attack the Administration's policy in Vietnam in time of war, as the previously cited article in Esquire clearly points out.

Despite such dark allegations that Vietnam was Fuerbringer's 'holy war', a view which implies he was deliberately trying to mislead his readers, it is far more likely that Time was wrong because Donovan and Fuerbringer believed that they were right and the correspondents were wrong. It is true that Time, Inc. executive feel Time's viewpoint carries much weight in Washington and that it would be a serious act for Time, Inc. to turn against the U.S. Government in time of war. Still, if Donovan and Fuerbringer had become convinced that such action was necessary, it is highly likely they would have taken it. 'The President would call Otto down to the ranch and show him a lot of information about how well the war was going, and Otto simply couldn't believe the Government was lying to him,' says a former Time editor.\*

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\*Esquire, op. cit. Otto Fuerbringer was formerly the Managing Editor of Time; Hedley Donovan is Time's Editor-in-Chief.

In this same article, another powerful New York editor, Osborn Elliot of Newsweek, confirmed the effectiveness of high-level Government briefings and tours around Vietnam.

When I went (to Vietnam) in 1965, I won't say like Romney that I was brainwashed, but I was snowed. I admit it. And when I went back in 1966, I came away just as bullish. You couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer massiveness of the American presence.\*

These examples of the reactions of some of the most powerful men in American journalism to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, may help explain why so much of the reporting seemed invariably timid and bland. Of course there were exceptions, but they were rare indeed--even during an event as significant as the 1968 Tet Offensive. In retrospect, some of the press reaction seems absolutely remarkable especially when compared with the comment to be found in the foreign press. Consider these examples:

1. On February 2, 1968, the strongest remark from the Washington Post seems today like only a mild rebuke.

"It is quite in keeping with official attitudes toward the war in Vietnam that attention should center on whether in the recent enemy rampage, Vietcong terrorists actually forced their way into the American Embassy... Whether they did or didn't, nothing could be less relevant to the real issues in Vietnam... Indeed the reactions are, in a way, more disquieting than the events themselves."

2. The New York Times on February 5th was somewhat more forceful.

"Two extraordinary developments in the Far East in recent weeks (The Pueblo Crisis and the Tet Offensive) make it imperative for the Administration at last to reappraise rigid policies that have brought this nation and its fighting men unprecedented humiliation and peril."

3. On February 9th, The Times was somewhat more restrained.

"The Administration's organized optimism over the failure of the Vietcong's Tet Offensive is unfortunately ill-founded."

4. The first reactions of the news magazines followed very much the same pattern. Time, on February 9th, had the following to say:

"To a capital lulled by repeated boasts that the military war was being won, the strength and duration of the Red Offensive came as an unpleasant even humiliating surprise... Between the Red Offensive and North Korea's seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo, the mighty U.S. suddenly seemed as impotent as a bleached whale."

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\*Ibid.

5. Newsweek on February 12th had this to say:

"Whatever the quality of their intelligence reports, Westmoreland and his commanders were clearly caught short by the scope and intensity of the raids...Inevitably, this raised an even more perplexing question about the effectiveness of General Westmoreland's aggressive search and destroy tactics...And though the President declared last week that 'We Americans will never yield,' his phone calls to Westmoreland seemed to indicate that even Mr. Johnson was not immune to occasional nagging doubts about the soundness of present U.S. strategy."

6. By their next issues the two magazines had adopted a somewhat more sharper tone. Commenting on Westmoreland, for the first time, Time said on February 16th:

"Inevitably, a new wave of criticism washed over the Capitol--and for the first time a good deal of it spilled onto General William C. Westmoreland, the handsome U.S. commander in Vietnam for nearly four years. Some of the criticism was aimed at his consistently sanguine estimates of a struggle that has grown increasingly sanguinary. But none was directed at the overall strategy and conduct of the war."

7. John Emmet Hughes, writing in Newsweek's February 19th issue, was one of the few to pronounce judgment on the whole affair. Newsweek, however, was far more cautious.

Hughes said: "As America now ponders the price of its policy in Asia, the quest for any healing wisdom must begin with the facing of one truth: the reckoning has been inevitable, for the policy was forever flawed. For many, it will be so much easier to explain away the Vietnam tragedy in terms of cruel misfortunes or chance misjudgments. But this kind of history has not been decreed by blunders--but by premises. It has not been ruled by anguishing circumstance, but by avowed purpose. And its full warning is not to be read as a matter of what America failed to do but what America tried to do."

Regardless of whether one agrees with Hughes' full analysis, his boldness seems rather refreshing after the cautious nature of most of the other comments being made at the time. In that same issue, Newsweek itself was content merely to raise a few basic questions rather than provide some answers.

"And while Administration topsiders talked optimistically about the basic effectiveness of U.S. strategy, an Army major viewed the rubble of the provincial city of Ben Tre and pronounced its Orwellian epitaph: 'It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.'"

"Now, in the light of the shattering events of the past two weeks, his critics concluded that Westmoreland had



either consciously misled the public or--equally unforgivable--had completely misjudged the outlook on the battlefield.

"It seems clear that ordinary Americans are likely to grow increasingly skeptical of both Westmoreland and of U.S. strategy in the field..."

8. During this same period, Ohio Democrat Stephen Young was quoted as demanding that Westmoreland be replaced by "a more competent general" because he has been "outwitted and outgeneraled."
9. The respected Parisian daily, Le Monde, has admittedly been generally against the war, and its initial comment on the Offensive seemed in keeping with this past tradition.

"Less than 48 hours were needed to destroy the remaining myths of the U.S. policies in Vietnam"

10. But perhaps the most devastating comment on the Offensive came, somewhat unexpectedly, from one of the most respected journals in Australia, a nation which has committed its own troops to the Vietnam struggle. In far stronger terms than any U.S. newspaper was willing to use, the Sydney Morning Herald seemed to be explicitly saying what most American journals were trying to say only by implication. On February 1, the Herald editorialized:

"Two things appear certain: that General Westmoreland had been handsomely outgeneraled by General Giap, and that the military initiative is firmly in the hands of the Communists."

On February 2, the Herald spoke out for immediate changes in the most unequivocal terms.

"Mr. Fairhall, Australia's Minister for Defense, commenting on the skillfully and ably coordinated Vietcong offensive said: 'These hit-and-run raid present no cause for dismay.' This is not only a singularly fatuous observation and one reflecting a failure to appreciate the situation in Vietnam; it is also depressing for another reason. Mr. Fairhall as Defense Minister should be taking the lead in calling for the correction of weaknesses in the conduct and direction of the war which have been painfully exposed and which imperil Australian forces and threaten to prolong their commitment in Vietnam.

"Are our defense minister and the Government of which he is a member satisfied with a situation in which the Allied commander has surrendered the initiative to the enemy... or with a situation in which Allied security measures are

so bad and local commanders so incompetent that aircraft at a major base twice previously attacked can still be destroyed on the ground...

"It should be clear now if it was not sufficiently clear before that a shake-up of the Allied command and a drastic overhaul of Allied strategy and tactics are due and overdue. It is extraordinary, in the light of every lesson of recent military history that General Westmoreland should throw away the advantages of vastly superior mobility and firepower and allow General Giap, employing thoroughly familiar strategy, to pin him down in static fortifications along the demilitarized zone...

"How far does the catalogue of ineptitude have to run before our Defense Minister sees 'cause for dismay'?"

Almost without question the U.S. press would have been far more effective and critical if it had not locked itself into the uncomfortable and inflexible position of being virtually an adjunct to the official U.S. Establishment in Vietnam. The press has allowed its news judgment and priorities to be completely dominated by MACV policies and allowed its perspective to be shaped by the scope of U.S. strategy. Most of the press did not realize that when the process began in the mid-1960's and most of the press undoubtedly does not realize that even now. (Nevertheless, that seems to be a fairly accurate assessment of the present state of affairs.) In other words, the press worked almost entirely within the framework of the official U.S. approach to the Vietnam problem while inadvertently renouncing its responsibility to criticize and offer reasonable alternatives. In commenting on the Tet Offensive, one can see from the sample of reactions presented earlier, that the American press confined itself for the most part to analyzing the enemy's objectives, cursing fate and bad luck for the disaster, but on the whole being remarkably reserved in making any criticisms of the U.S. military. Only a rare exception such as Emmet John Hughes was willing to make a judgment and draw any basic conclusions on U.S. strategy and policies from the evidence of the Offensive. Interestingly, Hughes was commenting from the United States. Reporters in the field, on the other hand, were so preoccupied with the momentary events in Saigon, that they seemed devoid of any sense of critical perspective. In many ways the reporting of the Tet Offensive reflects more than any other incident the failure of the press. The average reporter, unaware of his ignorance of the nature of the war or of the current situation, hammered authoritatively away at his typewriter about the "disaster" he thought was occurring. Psychologically, of course, it was a disaster as later events were to confirm. But the egregious, fundamental mistakes made by the U.S. Command at this time were not even suspected by most of the press, let alone reported. From a military point of view, for example, the situation was extremely confused. But nowhere did the press acknowledge that what may have superficially or momentarily seemed to be a defeat of great consequence for the United States could have been turned into a

momentous victory if the opportunity had been seized. Tremendous casualties were inflicted on the enemy as the press did indeed report. What it did not report, however, was that some top military commanders were urging MACV for permission to go on the offensive and pursue the retreating enemy, inflicting still greater (and possibly intolerable) casualties on his already battered forces, only to be forced by the high command to remain in defensive positions. Had a different decision been made the course of the war, and especially the ability of the North Vietnamese to continue the fight, might have been radically effected. It also took the press weeks and sometimes months before it realized that the enemy may have lost more prestige and support among the South Vietnamese people than it gained, by its vicious attacks on the country's main urban centers. Although by that time the American public was naturally preoccupied with other public matters and had lost much of its detailed assessment of the Offensive.

Like the magazines and newspapers, television coverage of the Tet Offensive, and the war in general, had its strengths and weaknesses. The greatest difference, however, was that television concentrated on the dramatic, visual aspects of a story. Television naturally thrived on visual action. Some say it created it, and in many cases permitted its news judgment to be ruled by it. Reporters for the various networks constantly derived the insatiable demands of their home offices for "bang-bang" but they also knew it was the only sure way to make the air back home. A few television executives and correspondents fought the system but in the end they too lost and either submitted to it, worked around it, or departed. Fred Friendly, formerly the president of CBS News, was perhaps the most notable example. Admittedly, there had been a long list of disagreements between Friendly and the CBS, Inc. management before the final parting, but the specific incident which led to his walkout certainly exemplifies television's view towards Vietnam and news coverage in general.

The disagreement was over live coverage of former ambassador George Kennan's testimony on U.S. Vietnam Policy before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Committee's hearings on Vietnam had been going on for several days and each day Friendly found himself in the humiliating position of begging time from the network to preempt regular programming to broadcast the hearings. On the day Kennan was to appear, the highest network executives informed Friendly live coverage would be impossible because of the cost. As Kennan started testifying, Friendly sat in New York watching the hearings over closed-circuit television and became increasingly convinced that Kennan's testimony was so significant it demanded live coverage, regardless of the cost. He also decided that if he was still overruled because of commercial and financial considerations he would quit. His resignation was submitted before the end of the day.

In explaining his reasons for leaving, Friendly argued that television had an overriding commitment to public service and that the medium's impact on the public was so great, decisions involving news judgment could not be left to high-powered executives who had no experience in this area. Friendly had much more to say and none of it made good reading in the offices of the CBS management. Of course, Friendly was not without his

own failings but it might well be argued that few of the executives that followed him at CBS, or at any of the other networks, were as serious or as concerned as Friendly about the Vietnam War. Far too often the network news executives judged their coverage of Vietnam against the performance of their television rivals rather than against the demands of the story itself. So for the most part, television geared its coverage to its own ideas of what the public would watch rather than what the public should be told. The network news executives could certainly have corrected the situation but some of them were simply too far from the scene to appreciate the complexities of the story, some were too unsophisticated to understand, while some simply didn't care. Those executives who did understand were too often powerless to make any reforms or improvements. One network, for example, evidently thought the War was such an easy and undemanding assignment (or just didn't care one way or the other) that it was (and is) notorious for sending its least able correspondents to Saigon. In any event, the "bang-bang" stories made marvelous television and attracted the audiences, which often seemed to be the major objective. In fact, the mania for action footage was so intense during the late 1960's that even some of the senior correspondents were drafted for duty on the front lines in Vietnam where they inevitably found themselves wondering why they were doing the job of a much younger man and why they were not doing the more thoughtful and meaningful pieces commensurate with their experience and talents.

Sir Robert Thompson, the British expert on counter-insurgency, and an adviser to the U.S. Government on Vietnam, recognized the superficial nature of most of the television coverage of the Vietnam War and commented on this in his latest book.

It must be understood that a television camera has very limited vision. It is not always on the spot and even when it is the scenes are open to widely different interpretation. I am reminded of the experience of a friend of mine who was BBC correspondent in the Far East. It was normally his practice to visit trouble spots in a fairly relaxed manner, to interview knowledgeable people on the spot and then to have a quiet look around himself. At the end of this, he would record a short, five-minute objective summary of the situation as he saw it. At the time of the Tet Offensive, however, he was rushed into Saigon with a television cameraman to provide additional coverage. He complained that he was just being dragged around by the cameraman and would probably get shot. He could only comment on the pictures which the camera could take and had little idea what was going on anyway. When he got to Hue and saw American aircraft dive-bombing the citadel still held by the Vietcong, all he could think of saying into the microphone was: 'My God! It's just like watching television!'

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\*Sir Robert Thompson, No Exit from Vietnam (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), p. 9.

The great tragedy is that television, in its better moments, can match the often profound impact of picture with the eloquence of words to provide incomparable insights into any situation. And on occasion television did just that. In 1968 CBS presented a one-hour documentary on the Viet Cong that won several awards and the praise of many experts including Doug Pike. After viewing the film, Pike observed that the film "was one of the best studies of the Viet Cong" he had ever seen. But on the whole, television produced very few of its "finest hours" on the Vietnam War primarily because the "bang-bang" footage proved so ideal for the medium.

Of course, television suffered the same weaknesses as the other media, but in general it seemed to suffer so much more. Limited in air time far more than the print media were limited by space, the reporter barely had time in many cases to provide anything beyond captions for the pictures. Moreover, many if not most television reporters in Vietnam had far too little background in Asian affairs to overcome all the other handicaps of their medium, while some of them had simply accepted the assignment to advance their careers and so their interest in the war itself was minimal. In some respects, that was all that was required. With so little editorial guidance from their home offices except to keep getting more sensational battle stories, most reporters did nothing but follow the big combat units around in the field and usually for only a few days at a time. As a general rule, most television correspondents had little first-hand knowledge of the pacification program and the networks made few serious attempts at providing sustained coverage of this effort. Moreover, few television correspondents had any serious contacts with the more thoughtful members of the Mission who could provide valuable insights into the War. Some senior television correspondents, however, were exceptions to this rule. And on occasion a few excellent reports were filed although this work rarely made prime-time news shows--probably because network executives reasoned "think" pieces were not dramatic enough for American television audiences.

Despite this generally superficial approach to the War, television probably deserves greater attention than the other media because of its undeniably powerful impact on the American public. Vietnam is advertised as television's "first" war and most Americans did indeed depend on the medium for much of their news from Vietnam. It is doubtful, however, whether the public realized how much of the Vietnam story it was missing or whether it really cared. Possibly not. But it is at least open to question whether the course of the War would have been different if the public had been better informed on U.S. policy and programs in Vietnam, the realities of Vietnam, and on the policy alternatives that existed.

The most regrettable and disturbing aspect, however, is not the past performance of the press, but the absence of any real signs of changes or improvements in the immediate future. Sir Robert Thompson even suggests this is more than one should expect, for "an understanding of what is happening in war is not by any means a new problem." Sir Robert added the following:



At the outset the issues of the war were well understood and the United States involvement was strongly supported both at home and abroad. But there has been a complete lack of understanding of the nature of the war and of what has been happening. It has been this, rather than a failure of communications between government and people, which has led to the 'credibility gap'. Confusion has been confounded by the mass media because the weight and diversity of the material which has been inflicted on the individual has been quite beyond his capacity to sift and evaluate. It has merely left an impression that war, and especially civil war, is beastly and must be stopped at all costs. This is not a novel revelation. There is nothing new about the horror and tragedy of the Vietnam war except that it has been exposed to the cameras and brought into the sitting-room. In the past, wars were viewed at long range through dark glasses. When people's views both of issues and events depended on lead writers and on dispatches from a distant correspondent, the involvement was slight but the appreciation clearer. Now all are involved and no one is spared a single detail. This leads to a situation, particularly in the complicated circumstances of a People's Revolutionary War, where a hundred lines of argument can be supported by evidence and can be passionately held with complete conviction. Certainly in the case of Vietnam few have been able to see the wood for the defoliated trees.\*

A very distinguished reporter for one of the major American news organizations who was based in Vietnam for the better part of the decade stated the problem somewhat differently.

The press wasn't the only one that failed. Everyone failed. The whole communications process broke down. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon sentence simply couldn't do the job, it simply couldn't reconcile these two diverse frames of references and systems of values. A sentence written in Mytho for some reason read differently in Saigon and its meaning was even more distorted in Washington, although the words were unchanged. Everything was relative and this is probably a reflection of the great differences between the United States and South Vietnam. An American advisor, for example, who had assimilated into Vietnamese society to some extent had great difficulty being understood by his superiors in Saigon who were operating on a different frame of reference and a different sense of values so you can imagine the communications problem between this same adviser and the officials in Washington. The press faced much the same problem. I think we wrote some intelligent and meaningful reports on the war but it just didn't register.

Our editors and the public simply couldn't understand the realities of this war, it was too divorced from their frame of reference. And this is going to happen again, in the Government and in the press.

On the overall performance of the press, I would say it was good, bad and indifferent and for a whole series of interacting reasons. And I don't think it will change. The system will remain and the press will probably do exactly the same with Vietnam next time around, if that happens.

In other words, this experienced correspondent contends that the failure of the press was only one aspect of the failure of the entire American effort in Vietnam and that neither the press effort nor the Government effort can be fully understood one without the other. Of course the press had many failings but its poor performance primarily reflected the inadequacies of the official U.S. Government effort. So that, if the Government effort and policy line had been more effective, more realistic, then the press might have been more successful in its coverage of the War. As it turned out, however, U.S. policy was ambiguous and somewhat confused and thus directly resulted in confusion in the press. And since U.S. priorities were misplaced, that too was faithfully reflected in the coverage by the press. Thus, the press was not much better or much worse than the Government effort it was trying to follow. Without question there were some notable exceptions, but where the press as a whole should have served as an informed observer and thoughtful critic, it too often became an overpowered amplification system for the conventional Government wisdom of the day. Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but it is indisputably clear the press failed because it was simply inadequate to the challenge of providing satisfactory coverage of the Vietnam War.

An example of this was the Mylai atrocity. Almost every reporter knew, or should have known, that such incidents were occurring and yet there were extremely few reports anywhere on this tragic aspect of the war. When asked why his network had failed to publicize such incidents before the Mylai affair was disclosed by the Government, one very capable editor at a national network replied, "We thought we had told the public but it's obvious we never said it loud and often enough." Another judgment was provided by a young writer who is admittedly against the War, but who has also seen as much of Vietnam as any other reporter today in American journalism. He describes not only why the press failed in this specific case but why it failed to provide better coverage throughout the war:

...Few American correspondents I knew and talked to seemed to question the basic assumptions of the war. (This was not true for the foreign press.) There was much written about strategy, body count, the success or failure of an operation, progress in Revolutionary Development, or the stabilizing of the current Saigon regime. But few seemed to be asking, in 1967, if the

whole notion of pacification was desirable or tenable, whether Westmoreland was in touch with the realities of the war, whether Americans should be in Vietnam to begin with. Many correspondents had opinions, complaints, and criticisms, and in private would talk about them. But they would seldom write about them. Like the soldiers, they too, had a job to do for a given period of time. They, too, needed to stay in favor, keep official sources open, and avoid antagonisms between themselves and the military, who were at once their guides and protectors in the field....

Back in Saigon, one is protected, though you could hear and see bombs and flares on the city's outskirts. Here there are many other journalists with whom to drink and gripe. One can very quickly get wrapped up in local affairs. There is either the threat of a palace coup to cover, or a pseudo election overseen by a troop of presidential observers who stand conspicuously but dumbly beside a ballot box and have their pictures taken. There is the Five O'clock Follies in a neat air-conditioned auditorium. There are new operations going out, and myriad press releases from hundreds of governmental agencies, which are distributed from a huge rack at the press office. There are giant new computer schemes to tell us if we are winning the hearts and minds of the people. There are black market scandals, corruption in the Vietnamese government, apathy in the ARVN forces, to be reported. There are students in jail, Buddhists protesting, human interest stories about prostitutes and shoeshine boys adopted by kindly GIs. Most correspondents must file a story of some kind every day. The folks at home want progress reports. If a reporter dug too deeply into official assumptions, the chances were (and probably still are) that his story would be cut or dropped and that he would get nothing but the bitter animosity of the Vietnam military apparatus, upon which he was dependent for future stories, travel, and all the other assistance he needed to keep on top of the news. One correspondent for a Washington paper, with whom I talked upon returning from Quang Ngai, claimed that he knew all about what was happening up there. Yet he wrote little which spelled out the significance of the fact that the US had destroyed two provinces without anyone's hardly noticing it. The correspondent himself seemed unmoved by what he had heard and claimed to know. Perhaps he had seen so much of the same kind of destruction in other areas that it hardly seemed newsworthy.

But even if a correspondent had been horrified by what he had seen and learned of the war, there were few newspapers or magazines that seemed disposed to print such unsettling reports. One Newsweek correspondent told me on returning from Quang Ngai that he was shocked by what was going on in the countryside. Having had experience in Europe during World War II, he said that what he had seen was "much worse than

what the Nazis had done to Europe." Had he written about it in those terms? No.

The press has, of course, on many occasions bravely ferreted out news, despite official resistance. Newsmen have reported examples of ghastly US errors and of cruelty for which Vietnamese civilians paid. But more often than not, incidents of a city destroyed to save it, or a village accidentally bombed, or of torture in government prisons, are portrayed as exceptions to the rule, rather than the rule itself. They are duly regretted, those involved are instructed to be more cautious, and the American public rests assured that they will not be repeated. That, at least, has been the case up to now.\*

As the selection from Schell's piece shows, the problem of the press was not one of personnel but of organization and attitude. Even the best of the correspondents in Vietnam were far too preoccupied with constant deadlines to sit back and reflect. Under this tremendous pressure they understandably had few opportunities for developing anything that approached an objective prospective on the War. In his magnificent work on the Vietnam War, Sir Robert Thompson suggests this obsession with action for its own sake may reflect a basic flaw in the American national character. "There is always an air of bustle in any American headquarters. If anything happens it is essential to do something, frequently without thinking." And despite its tremendous enterprise in covering the Vietnam War, the press often seemed to have acted and written without much serious thought or reflection.

Theoretically, the press is the self-appointed watchdog of the federal government. In this case it was not, primarily because the press somehow overlooked that responsibility in preparing its own order of battle for the Vietnam War. There was no realization, even when the concern existed, that the traditional techniques of the press were simply inadequate to the job. Yet if the problem had been recognized, the great news media of the United States certainly have the resources, imagination, and experience to have conceived a remedy.

One obvious solution for any of the major organizations would have been the creation of a small group of the most talented and knowledgeable correspondents to independently analyze and evaluate U.S. policy in Vietnam. In other words, a miniature think-tank or task force could have been created to devote its entire energies to analyzing American policy in Vietnam and evaluating possible alternatives. This should probably still be done and it is certainly within the means of any of the major news organizations in the United States. These same organizations already have well-staffed research departments to dig out information

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\*Orville Schell, "Pop Me Some Dinks," The New Republic, January 3, 1970.

on Vietnam and other subjects and this proposal only involves carrying this same concept one step further. Several of the major news organizations also assembled special units to evaluate the Warren Report on the Kennedy assassination. In retrospect, it seems absolutely amazing that something similar wasn't attempted on Vietnam. And if the media, especially television, can spend millions of dollars covering the space shots, they can certainly invest equal amounts of manpower and money in examining the Vietnam War. Time magazine, for example, has just introduced a distinguished panel of the nation's leading economists to advise them on economic issues. Surprisingly, nothing along these lines has been done on Vietnam.

Of course, to make any such task force effective, the individual news organizations would have to commit themselves to providing these groups with sufficient opportunities to present their views and the results of their research and investigation.

For practical reasons and to avoid adding to the national confusion, the news media might even consider pooling their resources to create one, or at most two, industry-wide groups consisting of the best men from each of the major organizations, supported by sufficient staff. Given sufficient time and opportunity it is almost inconceivable that such a task force would not make a major, and perhaps unique, contribution to American journalism and the national debate on Vietnam.



Exposition and Elaboration

CHART PAGES 13-14

CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS OF  
PRESS POLICY AND PRESS OPERATIONS;  
AN ILLUSTRATION OF MISLEADING PRESS POLICIES

By

Cary Aminoff

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CHARACTERISTICS AND PROBLEMS OF PRESS POLICY AND  
PRESS OPERATIONS; AN ILLUSTRATION OF MISLEADING PRESS POLICIES

The Vietnam War should have been the <sup>best</sup> reported war in the nation's history. The press certainly invested more money, assigned more correspondents and cameramen, devoted more space, time and effort to this war than it had to any other major conflict in recent times. Countless millions were spent by the networks alone each year to finance their coverage of the war, while the print media spent nearly as much. And at one point some 500 correspondents, representing every major news organization in the world, were based in the war zone. These legions of reporters, most of them American, covered the conflict with tremendous enterprise and initiative, usually risking their lives in the process.

The press in Vietnam also had nearly unprecedented freedom to investigate and report. As a matter of routine policy, the top U.S. military commanders extended almost every conceivable courtesy and privilege to reporters and cameramen. Thus, they could go almost anywhere, see almost anything, and could rely on the U.S. military to get them there and back. In fact, fewer restrictions were placed on the press in this war than perhaps in any other war in which the United States had ever been involved.

But somehow this entire effort was mostly in vain for after all that has been said and written, Vietnam remains the most misunderstood war of our times. Much of the blame for this lack of understanding and general bewilderment must rest with the American press.

Perhaps the basic problem was the almost fanatical obsession of the press with the spectacle rather than the substance of the war. The reporters invariably seemed to concentrate on the dramatic, sensational, but basically superficial aspects of the conflict. It was "blood and guts" coverage in the best tradition of World War II, but only rarely did the press show either insight into the complexities of the War or profound understanding of the realities of the situation. Most of the time the press simply followed the basic military approach to the War and that in turn inhibited any serious attempts to criticize the official effort. And this essentially superficial coverage of the War coupled with an uncritical acceptance of the official view tended to reinforce the credibility of official U.S. Government policies and strategy. Undoubtedly strong patriotic feelings were a compelling factor throughout, nevertheless the press largely failed to develop a broad perspective of its own on the War, and almost completely failed to inform the nation of the existence of more effective, alternative policies. But if the press had been more conscientious and alert, more knowledgeable and incisive, perhaps even more cynical, the U.S. Government might have been faced with a far better informed public, and as a result the history of the past five years might have been substantially different.

This critique, however, can apply only to the performance of the press after the intervention in 1965, not before, for in the early 1960's the press was neither timid, nor complacent nor uncritical of the U.S. Government effort. In fact, it was aggressive, highly critical and strongly skeptical

of just about everything the Government was saying on the subject of progress in the War. But, of course, it was a much different war then: the conflict was still rather limited, the issues were relatively clear-cut, deception and incompetence were fairly easy to detect. Most importantly, U.S. troops were not directly involved. The official United States role was largely advisory and there were consequently fewer psychological, emotional or bureaucratic pressures on reporters to practice self-censorship. And in these circumstances, press seemed to find it easier to cultivate a certain degree of objectivity and detachment about the bitter struggle, and to expose mistakes and failures where they existed.

Once U.S. combat troops began dying in Vietnam in large numbers, and once the War had become a major domestic political issue, the press inevitably became less candid and aggressive. But in the initial stages of the conflict it was evident to almost everyone, except the U.S. Government, that the situation was not going well, although during these early years the press in Saigon rarely relied on the Government for much of anything beyond transport out to the field. Moreover, by 1963 there was almost no question as to how the War was going. Buddhist monks were burning themselves to death on Saigon street corners, some of the better American advisors were quitting in disgust and President Diem--gradually losing control of the situation--came to resemble a paranoid Mandarin on a somewhat tarnished throne.

In the early days covering Vietnam required energy, patience, keen intelligence and, in many ways, the story and reporters made a good match. What the reporters lacked in patience and politeness they more than made up for with a fierce determination to track down the story and challenge the complacency of the U.S. bureaucracy. Under different conditions their rebellious and often courageous prose might have been far more controlled, but the press corps realized it was venturing onto relatively virgin territory and understood all the freedom the situation allowed.

The press corps also benefited from the fact that its readership was interested in Vietnam, but not passionately involved. During those early days Vietnam was actually no more than a fascinating sideshow to the Cold War dramas going on in Berlin and Cuba. So with the nation's attention primarily focused on those two areas, vested interests and emotional prejudices on Vietnam were at a minimum, and reporters were free to choose their targets without much fear of offending anyone. Basically the nation was more curious about Vietnam than anything else. Pacification and counterinsurgency were, after all, new terms that had just made their first prominent appearance in the general vocabulary. Guerrilla warfare was something few understood, even at the White House. And generally speaking, those who were interested in Vietnam were intrigued, trying consciously to be objective and willing to listen to the press with an open mind.

The credibility of the press was further enhanced by its running battle with the Administration over progress in the War. The Administration was saying one thing about the situation in Vietnam, not surprisingly the press was saying quite another. It was clear the public tended to believe the press rather than the Government as most interested readers seemed completely ready to believe that the Government was engaged in yet another losing venture. If the circumstances had been different however, and the United States

had been totally committed, then the public would surely have been under much greater psychological pressure to "rally-round-the-flag," as later events would show.

The fact that most of the reporters in the early days were newcomers to Vietnam was curiously more of an advantage than a disadvantage. They had brought few preconceived ideas with them to Saigon, they had fresh insights, and they had no bitter reminiscences of the past. They were primarily eager to see and learn, and the opportunities for field investigation were unparalleled, enabling the press to get closer to the real situation in Vietnam than it would for the rest of the decade.

For the most part, this realistic view of the situation was purely accidental as the orientation of the press only reflected the priorities of the Government. And American activities at this time were focused on ARVN, pacification and village security; in other words, those problems that have been the most critical and basic issues throughout the war. There was no fundamental disagreement between the press and the U.S. Government (or indeed, inside the Government itself) on the importance of these problems. The controversy was over the effectiveness of U.S. policies directed at those problems and the competence of the Vietnamese to solve them. But since the U.S. was still not totally committed, there was far less pressure on being cautious and "fair," and instead there was a tremendous incentive on being objective and even bold. Indeed, as long as American combat troops were not dying by the thousands in a "dirty" Asian jungle war, members of the press enjoyed considerable freedom to speak their mind, which they did with disturbing regularity. Homer Bigart of The New York Times--a gifted writer and a sensitive reporter--was a perfect example. He repeatedly filed pessimistic but accurate reports on the situation that thoroughly enraged the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. John Mecklin, a journalist himself who was head of USIS during the last years of the Diem regime, has an amusing reference to this in his published recollections of that period.

At a meeting in Washington, a "negative" story by Homer Bigart in The New York Times was under discussion. A senior official cracked that "Mr. Bigart spells his name wrong," meaning that it should be "bigot." Everyone laughed. Among newspapermen, Bigart was one of the most respected men in the trade.\*

Bigart's final report on Vietnam only reconfirmed his earlier views. Entitled "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem," and written on his return from Saigon in the summer of 1962, Bigart concludes with a prophetic warning to the Administration to avoid the obvious temptation of sending U.S. combat troops into Vietnam.

No one who has seen conditions of combat in South Vietnam would expect conventionally trained U.S. forces to fight any better against Communist guerrillas than did the French

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\*John Mecklin, Mission in Torment (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 114.

in their seven years of costly and futile war. For despite the talk here of training men for jungle warfare, of creating counter-guerrillas who can exist in forests and swamps and hunt down the Vietcong, Americans may simply lack the endurance and the motivation to meet the unbelievably tough demands of jungle fighting.\*

This first generation of Vietnam correspondents also produced several excellent books on the conflict that have stood the test of time remarkably better than most of the bureaucratic reports of that period. One of the best of these books, The Making of a Quagmire, written by David Halberstam (of The New York Times), explains in detail why the journalists were far better observers than the professional analysts and diplomats. Halberstam's thesis, supported by most other thoughtful observers, maintains that free expression and objectivity were almost effectively stifled by a tyrannical bureaucratic system that considered anything but undiluted optimism as intolerable.

Halberstam and his colleagues were, of course, under no such constraints and were free not only to write as they saw fit but also to concentrate on essentials. For the most part, they were relieved of the burden of covering daily events in Vietnam, and thus could ignore much of the trivia that would seem so important later. Instead they devoted their energies to writing what virtually amounts to current history. To be sure, much of what they did write was trivial, perhaps irrelevant, and somewhat unbalanced, but the standard of reportage in that period has generally been recognized as far superior to the journalistic output of later years.

Even some Government officials have been forced to concede that point. John Mecklin, for instance, head of USIS during the last years of the Diem period, was plagued throughout his time in Saigon by the press and its running battle with the Government. And in his recollections of that period, Mecklin writes that the press corps then was not "lovable, much less faultless." But he also says that responsibility for the press-Government relationship was not all one-sided, and that the press was far better than most Government officials were willing to admit.

For the most part the policy-makers in Washington and Saigon were fifteen or twenty years older than the resident newsmen. They had devoted their careers to military or diplomatic service in a good many countries, through a good many crises. They were understandably resentful of the brash young newsmen who presumed the right to sit in judgment. This, however, was the nature of the species. American newsmen, whatever their age, are often brash and hard to live with. This is one reason why Americans are the best-informed people in the world. The burden of the blame for the mess in Saigon must therefore lie with the officials who tried to reform the American press

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\*Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem," The New York Times, July 25, 1962.



from the other side of the world instead of learning to live with it, who were old enough and who should have been sophisticated enough to know better. This was particularly true in view of the subsequent evidence that the "immature" newsmen were better judges of what was happening in Vietnam than the supposedly seasoned experts.\* (Emphasis added.)

Mecklin was not alone in paying tribute, however qualified, to members of the American press corps in Vietnam. Two of them, in fact, dominated the 1963 awards for journalistic excellence. Halberstam, the most famous of these "young Turks," shared the Pulitzer Prize that year with his colleague and friend Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press. For some reason, however, the Pulitzer Committee passed over the third member of this group, Neil Sheehan, then of United Press International, whom Mecklin praised in particular for his outstanding energy, ingenuity and personal integrity. While the younger correspondents monopolized the major journalism awards that year, the older correspondents in this group were no less capable or talented. Charles Mohr, for example, originally went to Vietnam for Time-Life and filed some magnificent reports on the discouraging prospects. As his reward he was either overruled or ignored by his home office, forcing him to quit in disgust, join The New York Times and become one of its top foreign correspondents.

By the time the escalation began in 1965, however, almost all the veterans of the Diem days were on their way to new assignments. In their place came hordes of reporters and cameramen who were, for the most part, not nearly as talented or perspicacious. Most of them knew little about the country, its people or the past history of the War. Nor, perhaps, did many of them care. They had come to Vietnam to cover the dramatic American buildup and they were already intoxicated by this tremendous spectacle. But few realized that this obsession with the awesome U.S. military presence would radically affect the perspective of the press, distort its sense of priorities and compromise its very effectiveness.

The most immediate result of the American buildup on both the press and the Government itself was a revolution in perspective. With more and more troops arriving, the war had now irrevocably become an American war being fought by American troops. The basic character of the conflict had, of course, not changed but the priorities and sense of values of the press, as well as the Government, had been revolutionized, and not for the better. There were at least two and possibly three different wars going on in Vietnam at the time and the press, reflecting only the official outlook, had no doubts about which struggle deserved first priority--the big-unit war between the United States and the North Vietnamese. Naturally everything else was secondary, including South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese.

By concentrating almost exclusively on the American effort the press was, in effect, taking a one-dimensional view of a multi-dimensional problem. Predictably this led to highly superficial coverage that had little

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\*John Mecklin, op. cit., p. 124.

depth and few insights. But while the press as a whole increasingly lost touch with the reality of Vietnam, the reporters themselves were not entirely to blame. Between the frantic effort to keep up with the troops and the maddening pressure of constant deadlines, reporters had few opportunities to reflect and analyze. The same was obviously true in the Government. As Sir Robert Thompson recently observed, "With the introduction of a seven-day, sixty-hour week in all American headquarters no one was given any time to think." By the late 1960's, in fact, the conflict had expanded so radically and become so confusing that editors were led to devoting most available resources to the obvious, which resulted in a tremendous decrease in opportunities for more thoughtful reporting or intensive field investigation. The recollections of one reporter, and later Saigon bureau chief, for one of the major American media provides an illustration "I remember one time during the early 1960's when I told one of our people to go down to Usom and then get out into the provinces. As he started to leave I made it quite plain that I didn't want to see him for at least two weeks. Of course, it turned out to be a richly rewarding project but as the years went by there were less and less possibilities, and fewer demands, for that type of reporting. For one thing I didn't have the manpower to spare and even if I did it wouldn't have been used. They just didn't seem to be interested."

So by force of circumstances and expediency, most reporters found themselves dividing their time between Saigon and the U.S. troops in the field with few other diversions in between. Obviously this did not encourage much informed coverage of Vietnam but it was vigorously argued that there were other factors to be considered. The standard argument went something to the effect that there were more urgent and immediate priorities, there wasn't enough manpower to spare, no one back home was really interested in anything except the "big-bang" war, and finally that American troops were actually winning the war. Any conscientious reporter who attempted to defy the formidable logic of this system was also forced to perform the often herculean feat of saying something meaningful in the limited space or time that was normally made available. But talent aside, there was only so much any writer could say in a thousand words in a newspaper, a short column in a magazine, or two minutes on television.

Of course, there were many occasions when reporters were given the opportunity to write longer, more thoughtful pieces on some of the basic issues in the war. Although these opportunities were far too rare, some of the more incisive Vietnam dispatches represented journalism at its best. Charles Mohr, for example, returned to Vietnam for The New York Times during the 1965 buildup and consistently filed some excellent pieces throughout the remaining years of the decade. Robert Shaplen was perhaps the most outstanding example of thoughtful journalism, but then he enjoyed an obvious advantage by virtue of the extraordinary privilege granted him to devote two months (or more) for researching and writing his "Letter from Saigon" to the prestigious New Yorker magazine. Significantly, both Shaplen and Mohr were Vietnam veterans of long-standing and--as a general rule--the veterans always seemed to have a far greater insight into the war. Neil Sheehan, somewhat younger than either Shaplen or Mohr, was

another talented member of this group who first made his reputation during the initial stages of the war. Of all his reports, however, an article entitled "Not a Dove But No Longer a Hawk" was perhaps the best. This was Sheehan's valedictory to Vietnam and it demonstrated the contribution that could be made by a sensitive reporter, if given the chance.

Although I often disagreed with the implementation of American policy during my first two years in Vietnam, I was in accord with its basic aims...While there are some patriotic and decent individuals among them, most of the men who rule Saigon have, like the Bourbons, learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They seek to retain what privileges they have to regain those they lost.

For its own strategic and political ends, the United States is thus protecting a Non-communist Vietnamese social structure that cannot defend itself and that perhaps does not deserve to be defended. Our responsibility for prolonging what is essentially a civil conflict may be one of the major reasons for the considerable amount of confusion, guilt and soul searching among Americans over the Vietnam War...

The moral degeneration caused by the G.I. culture that has mushroomed in the cities and towns is another malady...I have sometimes thought, when a street urchin with sores covering his legs, stopped me and begged for a few cents worth of Vietnamese piastres that he might be better off growing up as a political commissar. He would then, at least, have some self-respect...

In World War II and Korea Americans fought as they always like to think they fought--for human freedom and dignity. In Vietnam, this moral superiority has given way to the amorality of great power politics, specifically to the problem of maintaining the United States as the paramount power in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese people have become mere pawns in the struggle...

But I simply cannot help worrying that, in the process of waging this war, we are corrupting ourselves. I wonder when I look at the bombed out peasant hamlets, the orphans begging and stealing on the streets of Saigon, and the women and children with napalm burns lying on the hospital cots, whether the United States has the right to inflict this suffering and degradation on another people for its own ends. And I hope we will not, in the name of some anti-communist crusade, do this again.\*

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\*Neil Sheehan, "Not a Dove But No Longer a Hawk," The New York Times Magazine, October 9, 1966.

Frank McCulloch of Time-Life was another member of the press corps who first arrived as the Diem regime neared its final collapse and stayed through the big buildup. In 1967 as he prepared to leave Vietnam and accept a new assignment, McCulloch delivered his own farewell to the War he had chronicled for four long years.

It is true enough, as General Westmoreland and others have said, that there is no stalemate in Vietnam, that in every dimension of the conflict, measurable progress is being made. But after four years of exposure to Vietnam, I know that without amplification the statement means a very great deal--and next to nothing. The meaning lies in how much progress is being made, in what areas and to what lasting effect...

This being the case, the debate must properly focus not on bombing pauses, or on our presumed credibility before the world, or even on whether we should be in Vietnam or not, but on the rate of progress and what this implies.

These questions must be asked:

1. At the current or foreseeable rate of progress, how long will the struggle continue.
2. At what cost in money and blood.
3. For what reason...\*

But despite the few moments of glory that may have been thrown their way, thoughtful reporters were endlessly troubled by a sense of frustration and inadequacy. Every time, or almost every time, these reporters attempted to provide some perspective to the story their suggestions were ignored or rejected. The press establishment--especially in the States--was simply too American-oriented, or too Saigon-oriented, to permit many distractions from what they considered the major story of the Vietnam War. Stories on rural development in Vietnam suffered the most, and the specific affliction in this case was commonly called the "My g-d, not another pacification story" syndrome. One reporter recalling some examples of this remarked that "we tried to push stories on the Vietnamese, on the other war, but all we got in reply was a loud yawn. And there was a general belief that this lack of interest was also true for the readership."

Vietnam-based correspondents also learned quickly that any serious attempts to question basic U.S. policy or challenge accepted military strategy would be futile. In some cases the correspondent's report was not only ignored but directly contradicted by what his organization ultimately said in print. A recent article in Esquire, on Time and Newsweek magazines, provides an excellent illustration. The specific incident typified some of the problems and frustrations faced by Frank McCulloch during his years as Time-Life bureau chief in Saigon.

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\*Frank McCulloch, "A Farewell to Vietnam," Life Magazine, December 15, 1967.

'One time they asked us to file for a cover story on the American buildup,' recalls Art Zich, a Time correspondent in Saigon from 1965-7 and now an editor with Newsweek. 'When the story came out, it had a cover slash (a diagonal headline across the top) of something like 'Turning Point in Vietnam' and it read like, you know Yippie! the Yanks are coming and we're going to show those little fellows how to do it! There was no suggestion of that whatsoever in our files. We just said the buildup was the beginning of a long, long fight. McCulloch, according to Zich, 'felt a deep personal anguish. He felt the magazine was leading the public in the wrong direction and he tried to keep the bureau from falling apart.'\*

Another former Vietnam correspondent, an experienced journalist with a very distinguished reputation, argues that few people in the United States really wanted to understand, or perhaps could understand, the basic issues in the conflict. Otherwise, he maintains, there would have been greater comprehension and acceptance of press reports from Vietnam attacking the basic weaknesses in the U.S. strategy. At the same time, he strongly disagrees with those who contend the press made no valuable criticism of U.S. policies and strategies.

It was there. There were several reporters who were probing beneath the surface, who were writing meaningful copy. I can think of several offhand. Bernie Weinraub of The New York Times, Ward Just of The Los Angeles Times, Lee Lescaze of the Washington Post. But I don't think the public ever realized this stuff was published, or maybe they just didn't care. Vietnam was an important story basically only as a domestic issue while anything from Vietnam itself turned them off. Nixon knows that, Wallace knows that. All that the public was interested in was the "big-bang" war and that required little understanding. However, the war in its entirety, as a whole, was at least a four-dimensional problem that seemed to be so complex no one wanted to hear about it.

Moreover, there was this unshakable belief in the U.S. that we were invincible. Let me give you an example. In the fall of 1965, I guess it was, one of our top executives came out to Vietnam to see the buildup for himself. For the first five days everyone in the bureau briefed him as thoroughly as possible, and we took him around in an attempt to show him some of the complexities of the war. Then we flew to Camranh Bay and we went up in a chopper to get a good look at the whole area. Even in those early days Camranh was a pretty impressive sight and there was evidence all around us of the tremendous potential of American industrial technology,

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\*Chris Welles, "Newsweek (a fact) is the New Hot Book (an opinion)," Esquire, November 1969, p. 246.



organizational capabilities and U.S. military power. The only problem was that it was all a non-sequitur. In any event, while we were up there, this executive turned around to me and said 'You know, we should bring the top five Viet Cong leaders here, give them this same chopper ride, and I'll bet that after seeing what we've just seen, all this American power, they'd promptly give up the fight.' I just sat there stunned realizing that everything we had tried to tell him in the past five days had simply not registered. And, shortly after he returned home, we predictably published a major piece saying the war was being won!\*

There were few Americans anywhere who could believe that the United States was somewhat less than omnipotent on the Vietnam battlefields. For obvious reasons, the American military machine in Vietnam inspired false confidence in the minds of even the most skeptical. In a more balanced picture of the Vietnam conflict, the inadequacies in the military effort would have been far more apparent but unfortunately the press (as well as the Government) was not always committed to the broad perspective. Those few who knew the villages of Vietnam as well as its battlefields, who knew its peasants as well as its educated elite, were not at all impressed by the spectacle, but they were distinctly in the minority. Those who were less well informed could only base their judgments on subjective thinking, for what other alternative existed when the capriciousness of the press reports was equaled only by the ambiguity of Government proclamations? All in all, it seemed to be a hopelessly confused war without an end, without a policy or a strategy, and where the mood changed more often than the succession of South Vietnamese governments. The press, as bewildered as anyone else, seemed to believe everyone, had little faith in anyone, but reflected in its often contradictory reports whatever mood happened to be current at the time.

Constantly bombarded by both the press and the Government with contradictory information and opinion, the public retreated from the controversy and fell back on subjective opinion or personal bias to assess the war. Believing, in many cases, only what it wanted to believe, it was unable to believe, on the other hand, the pessimistic reports, while often too skeptical to accept the optimistic reports. In other words, the public gradually came to the point where it didn't know who to believe and decided to consider all sources of information as suspect. In its heart, the public wanted to believe that the U.S. was winning but its collective mind was far too confused by the increasing complexity of the problem to concentrate on anything but the most simplistic solutions to the war.

Having developed no real perspective of its own, the press certainly contributed to this general confusion by its promiscuous support of the most reasonable, or most fashionable, opinions of the moment. As confused

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\*This was told the writer in a personal interview.

as anyone else, the press found all the evidence so contradictory, ambiguous or ephemeral that it felt obliged to give the benefit of the doubt to any reasonable views, including the military's. Even some acknowledged experts on Vietnam, such as Douglas Pike of USIS, found themselves faced with this serious dilemma. Pike has often been referred to as the leading American expert on the Viet Cong, but in the introduction to his latest book he describes the common frustration of trying to assess the situation in Vietnam.

Vietnam defies simplification. At the vortex, Saigon, the complexity is greatest, the view most personal. Even after eight years one cannot leave Vietnam with any Great Truth Concluded unless one is simple-minded, or the servant of some interest other than truth (we've had more than our share of both). I flew out of Saigon dozens of times during the war and always, at take-off, with the same thoughts:

That in my latest stay I'd had no increment of wisdom, that at best I had managed to maintain a cool objective view, suspecting at the time that objectivity may reflect, not sagacity, only uncertzinty.

That once again I was leaving behind a place of pluses and minuses, of goods and bads (all, I cheerfully admit, measured by my own yardstick), of paradoxes and imponderables, leaving again with the tinge of sadness that comes in moments of reflection on the plight of the Vietnamese people, on one's own sins of omission, on the passage of time.

That beyond a few facts about Vietnam that I cart around like an attache case, all else hangs in a smog of relativity. One concludes that to leave heartened or sympathetic or revengeful or full of despair depends only slightly on where you where you were, for how long, or what you experienced in Vietnam; it indicates only baggage that you brought with you...

Raw opinion on Vietnam is cheap and largely worthless. Even straight facts are of limited value. Of course, to understand Vietnam it is necessary to collect data, but the fumbling comes in isolating important fact from the welter of trivia, in distilling the data into meaning. The materials consist of past and present events, our opinion of them, the ideal of what might be. The task of those of us who write about Vietnam is to relate the reality of the war to the logic of our experience. Herein lies the gulf. Vietnam has become the great intellectual tragedy of our times. Why this is so I do not understand. Living in Vietnam for eight years has contributed nothing to my enlightenment. The story of Vietnam has not been told, not even its beginnings. Perhaps it must be told from somewhere else. But non-fiction is the wrong medium. My greatest despair is that the story may never be told the way

it was. Even as I write, I must admit that my strongest feeling toward Vietnam remains puzzlement....\*

World War II, by comparison, was the epitome of clarity. There was never any misunderstanding or confusion about either Allied or German objectives and strategy while progress in the war was easy to see. In Vietnam, however, American policy was not only ambiguous and without any reliable standard for measuring progress but, to the press and public the United States often seemed to be fighting a "phantom" enemy whose strategy was unclear and who was both infuriatingly elusive and mysterious. In short, Vietnam was not only complex but confusing, vague, misleading, even aimless. More so, because what had been virtually unthinkable only a short time before was suddenly--or so it seemed--the lead item on that day's MACV releases while the phenomenon of the world's richest nation making such a huge commitment to one of the world's poorest nations was simply too complex to grasp.

Moreover, what effects this tremendous American presence was actually having on the war from 1965 onward was never entirely clear because the reality of Vietnam was equally confused. The press could provide little clarification for it, too, had become separated from reality by its own narrow perspective, by its preoccupation with the sensational, and by its reliance on the opinions and views of others. The press could also do little to reconcile the military's claims of progress with the critics' counter-claims, or Administration statements on negotiations with the position of the dissenters. The press could not even provide an accurate evaluation of the situation in Vietnam without consulting at least a half dozen sources who all had their own personal prejudices, biases, and conflicting views. The resulting confusion was so great that action became a widespread substitute for thought, as William Pfaff of Hudson Institute observed in a privately circulated journal written during a 1967 visit to Vietnam. Describing the mood of the Americans in Vietnam, Pfaff wrote, "Here nearly everyone is numbed by complexity and has fallen back on action, which is unambiguous."

Much of this confusion must be attributed to the corrupting effect of JUSPAO and the huge U.S. public relations machine. Their endless briefings and books of statistics, though generally received with sarcastic skepticisms, made it irresistible not to take the easy way out. Slowly, without realizing it, the media allowed the influence of the U.S. Government to become so strong that lead items in the press and on television were largely determined by MACV news releases or by the actions of the big U.S. combat units, and not by the realities of the war. Invariably the press placed the greatest emphasis on what the U.S. Mission (and this, of course, includes the military) had done on any given day rather than on what the U.S. had not done. Also, the news media all

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\*Douglas Pike, War, Peace and the Viet Cong (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1969), pp. V-VII.

suffered from an inherent inclination to judge events by their significance within the very narrow time span of 24 hours or 7 days. And since the news media thrive on novelty to retain their audience, the daily activities of the U.S. military not only provided the ideal elements for this proven commercial formula but were essentially the only aspect of the War which fit their conceptions of what the American public, as a whole, understood or wanted.

Of course, the press did not totally abdicate its responsibility either to think for itself or to criticize. However, its distorted perspective of the war immensely enhanced the credibility of the official rationale for U.S. policies and strategies. The sheer force of official arguments were reinforced over time by constant repetition and inevitably came to dominate the outlook of the press. At the same time, however, the press seemed to feel instinctively that the logic underlying U.S. policies was entirely wrong. But the widespread confusion, and their lack of experience with this kind of complex war seemingly blinded them to any of the other alternatives. In a recent issue, Time magazine described this process, about as well as anyone else has, in commenting on the battle for Hamburger Hill. "As so often before in the baffling, complicated war (the military case) was easy to fault, but lacking in reference to points to reality on which reasonable men might agree."

Escaping from this web of official logic and rationale would have involved a revolution in the attitudes and outlook of the press, something which the press itself was unwilling to undergo. There were simply too many pressures working against this. The system, if it could be called that, was too formidable an obstacle to give way to a few voices virtually crying out in the wilderness. Nor did the men who run the great news media of the U.S. see any need for a radically new outlook since they apparently did not know Vietnam or simply did not care. Like the directors of all powerful enterprises and institutions, these men were essentially conservative, essentially patriotic, and while willing to permit criticisms of certain aspects of the effort they could not bring themselves to denounce the effort as a whole. For one thing, many of them believed in it. The President of the United States, regardless of who he is, is not to be entirely disbelieved. Neither is a four-star general. In short, the government may not be brilliant but it seemed impossible--for the press or the public--to believe that it was entirely incompetent. Or put another way, the press had joined the system, adopted the official outlook, and acknowledged the progress that was being made without considering its significance. Complacency reigned.

The environment in Saigon, and throughout the U.S. military establishment in Vietnam, tremendously reinforced this universal psychology--although the moment the press moved beyond that perimeter the reporter's outlook usually changed considerably. The system, however, strongly discouraged many such independent initiative and so, for the most part, the press devoted its major efforts to covering the U.S. military, and inevitably spent most of its time with the military. Caught up as they were in this military environment, and in the day-to-day developments of the War, the press gradually began to accept much of the military logic and rationale.

Needless to say, the press obviously couldn't cover the entire war itself and so it was also dependent on the military for background, information, guidance, and for what was jokingly referred to in Vietnam as the "big picture." But the relationship went even further. Throughout much of Vietnam the press and the military lived right next to each other, flew on the same flights, ate in the same mess halls and frequently spent their free hours together. This familiarity did often lead to mutual contempt but it rarely provoked widespread criticism because the reporters were far more influenced by the military approach to the conflict than most of them would ever care to admit. They practically couldn't resist it. This was equally true for both reporters as well as for senior editors on whirlwind, red-carpeted tours. Making matters even worse was the inclination of the military outlook towards optimism above all else. Official confirmation (of sorts) to this effect was provided one time in Manila, by no less an authority than Robert Komer. At the time, Komer had not yet received his permanent appointment to the Saigon Mission and had come out to Vietnam from the White House to compile a report for the President. A large group of reporters caught up with him in Manila and began pressuring him to admit that the war was not going nearly as well as he was reportedly telling Washington. In reply, Komer reportedly said, "Gentlemen, I've finally put my finger on your main error. Contrary to what you may think, I was doing a report on progress in the war, not on the lack of it." And this same attitude prevailed on almost every level of the U.S. Establishment in Vietnam.

In retelling this very interesting tale, a reporter who spent many years in Vietnam pointed out, "It's very hard to say I've been taken. And that is something I was able to do only afterwards. When I was actually in Vietnam I received privileged treatment. Anytime I wanted to see Westmoreland I could. And I liked Westmoreland and his staff immensely. They were decent, good people, and they were extremely good to me. But you're really kidding yourself if you don't think this influences how you file. In retrospect, I must admit I was paying a price for this access to the brass." As the experience of this reporter suggests, the Government invariably has the advantage in this often close, and sometimes parasitic, relationship between the official bureaucracy and the press. Regardless of the reporter's instinctive skepticism and suspicion, he is almost forced to rely on his contacts in the bureaucracy for information, guidance, and of course for "inside" information. This was especially true in Vietnam where there was a great premium on "inside" information and where most of the press had little knowledge or background in military affairs and tactical warfare. As a result, the press was constantly looking to contacts in the military for guidance, more information, background and analysis to make their reports more comprehensible and authoritative. The press did not always acknowledge this dependence to themselves or to their readers, but many reporters did indeed write with great restraint simply because they felt incompetent to evaluate U.S. military tactics and strategy. So the press tried to provide some perspective to their reports by using the time-honored technique of quoting the opinions of a variety of "well-informed military sources," which most editors prefer anyway as the only proven way to keep their reporters' opinions out of the news columns and still balance straight factual reporting (if there is such a thing) with responsible analysis.



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Many reporters in Vietnam tacitly agreed. Sitting on the outside looking in, these reporters knew they were at a disadvantage, recognized their lack of expertise, and felt the only logical alternative was to give the benefit of the doubt to the supposedly better informed Government officials. It takes great presence of mind and considerable self-confidence on the part of a reporter to challenge a high Government official, especially a four-star general, who always has access to more information and uses this to great advantage in impressing the reporter with his knowledge and expertise, while reinforcing this with inevitably well-prepared arguments.

After a while most reporters in Vietnam (although by no means all) established close relationships with several officials that often developed into strong personal friendships, and this understandably tended to strengthen the bonds between the press and the Mission, while making the reporters even more hesitant about attacking basic U.S. policy in Vietnam. Of course, antagonism between the press and the Mission existed but most reporters who regularly saw the same Government officials every week inevitably began questioning their own thoughts on the war, and often tended--as a result--to be more sympathetic to the Government's point of view.

This attitude may have been even more prevalent among the high and mighty of the press establishment than among the hired hands. In the executive suites of the major American news organizations where policy is made, many of the top editors tended to believe--if they were not already convinced--that the U.S. was winning the war, however slowly. Many top editors also undoubtedly felt that it would be unpatriotic to attack the Administration's policy in Vietnam in time of war, as the previously cited article in Esquire clearly points out.

Despite such dark allegations that Vietnam was Fuerbringer's 'holy war', a view which implies he was deliberately trying to mislead his readers, it is far more likely that Time was wrong because Donovan and Fuerbringer believed that they were right and the correspondents were wrong. It is true that Time, Inc. executive feel Time's viewpoint carries much weight in Washington and that it would be a serious act for Time, Inc. to turn against the U.S. Government in time of war. Still, if Donovan and Fuerbringer had become convinced that such action was necessary, it is highly likely they would have taken it. 'The President would call Otto down to the ranch and show him a lot of information about how well the war was going, and Otto simply couldn't believe the Government was lying to him,' says a former Time editor.\*

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\*Esquire, op. cit. Otto Fuerbringer was formerly the Managing Editor of Time; Heddy Donovan is Time's Editor-in-Chief.

In this same article, another powerful New York editor, Osborn Elliot of Newsweek, confirmed the effectiveness of high-level Government briefings and tours around Vietnam.

When I went (to Vietnam) in 1965, I won't say like Romney that I was brainwashed, but I was snowed. I admit it. And when I went back in 1966, I came away just as bullish. You couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer massiveness of the American presence.\*

These examples of the reactions of some of the most powerful men in American journalism to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, may help explain why so much of the reporting seemed invariably timid and bland. Of course there were exceptions, but they were rare indeed--even during an event as significant as the 1968 Tet Offensive. In retrospect, some of the press reaction seems absolutely remarkable especially when compared with the comment to be found in the foreign press. Consider these examples:

1. On February 2, 1968, the strongest remark from the Washington Post seems today like only a mild rebuke.

"It is quite in keeping with official attitudes toward the war in Vietnam that attention should center on whether in the recent enemy rampage, Vietcong terrorists actually forced their way into the American Embassy... Whether they did or didn't, nothing could be less relevant to the real issues in Vietnam... Indeed the reactions are, in a way, more disquieting than the events themselves."

2. The New York Times on February 5th was somewhat more forceful.

"Two extraordinary developments in the Far East in recent weeks (The Pueblo Crisis and the Tet Offensive) make it imperative for the Administration at last to reappraise rigid policies that have brought this nation and its fighting men unprecedented humiliation and peril."

3. On February 9th, The Times was somewhat more restrained.

"The Administration's organized optimism over the failure of the Vietcong's Tet Offensive is unfortunately ill-founded."

4. The first reactions of the news magazines followed very much the same pattern. Time, on February 9th, had the following to say:

"To a capital lulled by repeated boasts that the military war was being won, the strength and duration of the Red Offensive came as an unpleasant even humiliating surprise... Between the Red Offensive and North Korea's seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo, the mighty U.S. suddenly seemed as impotent as a bleached whale."

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\*Ibid.

5. Newsweek on February 12th had this to say:

"Whatever the quality of their intelligence reports, Westmoreland and his commanders were clearly caught short by the scope and intensity of the raids...Inevitably, this raised an even more perplexing question about the effectiveness of General Westmoreland's aggressive search and destroy tactics...And though the President declared last week that 'we Americans will never yield,' his phone calls to Westmoreland seemed to indicate that even Mr. Johnson was not immune to occasional nagging doubts about the soundness of present U.S. strategy."

6. By their next issues the two magazines had adopted a somewhat more sharper tone. Commenting on Westmoreland, for the first time, Time said on February 16th:

"Inevitably, a new wave of criticism washed over the Capitol--and for the first time a good deal of it spilled onto General William C. Westmoreland, the handsome U.S. commander in Vietnam for nearly four years. Some of the criticism was aimed at his consistently sanguine estimates of a struggle that has grown increasingly sanguinary. But none was directed at the overall strategy and conduct of the war."

7. John Emmet Hughes, writing in Newsweek's February 19th issue, was one of the few to pronounce judgment on the whole affair. Newsweek, however, was far more cautious.

Hughes said: "As America now ponders the price of its policy in Asia, the quest for any healing wisdom must begin with the facing of one truth: the reckoning has been inevitable, for the policy was forever flawed. For many, it will be so much easier to explain away the Vietnam tragedy in terms of cruel misfortunes or chance misjudgments. But this kind of history has not been decreed by blunders--but by premises. It has not been ruled by anguishing circumstance, but by avowed purpose. And its full warning is not to be read as a matter of what America failed to do but what America tried to do."

Regardless of whether one agrees with Hughes' full analysis, his boldness seems rather refreshing after the cautious nature of most of the other comments being made at the time. In that same issue, Newsweek itself was content merely to raise a few basic questions rather than provide some answers.

"And while Administration topsiders talked optimistically about the basic effectiveness of U.S. strategy, an Army major viewed the rubble of the provincial city of Ben Tre and pronounced its Orwellian epitaph: 'It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.'"

"Now, in the light of the shattering events of the past two weeks, his critics concluded that Westmoreland had

either consciously misled the public or--equally unforgivable--had completely misjudged the outlook on the battlefield.

"It seems clear that ordinary Americans are likely to grow increasingly skeptical of both Westmoreland and of U.S. strategy in the field..."

8. During this same period, Ohio Democrat Stephen Young was quoted as demanding that Westmoreland be replaced by "a more competent general" because he has been "outwitted and outgeneraled."
9. The respected Parisian daily, Le Monde, has admittedly been generally against the war, and its initial comment on the Offensive seemed in keeping with this past tradition.

"Less than 48 hours were needed to destroy the remaining myths of the U.S. policies in Vietnam"

10. But perhaps the most devastating comment on the Offensive came, somewhat unexpectedly, from one of the most respected journals in Australia, a nation which has committed its own troops to the Vietnam struggle. In far stronger terms than any U.S. newspaper was willing to use, the Sydney Morning Herald seemed to be explicitly saying what most American journals were trying to say only by implication. On February 1, the Herald editorialized:

"Two things appear certain: that General Westmoreland had been handsomely outgeneraled by General Giap, and that the military initiative is firmly in the hands of the Communists."

On February 2, the Herald spoke out for immediate changes in the most unequivocal terms.

"Mr. Fairhall, Australia's Minister for Defense, commenting on the skillfully and ably coordinated Vietcong offensive said: 'These hit-and-run raid present no cause for dismay.' This is not only a singularly fatuous observation and one reflecting a failure to appreciate the situation in Vietnam; it is also depressing for another reason. Mr. Fairhall as Defense Minister should be taking the lead in calling for the correction of weaknesses in the conduct and direction of the war which have been painfully exposed and which imperil Australian forces and threaten to prolong their commitment in Vietnam.

"Are our defense minister and the Government of which he is a member satisfied with a situation in which the Allied commander has surrendered the initiative to the enemy... or with a situation in which Allied security measures are



so bad and local commanders so incompetent that aircraft at a major base twice previously attacked can still be destroyed on the ground...

"It should be clear now if it was not sufficiently clear before that a shake-up of the Allied command and a drastic overhaul of Allied strategy and tactics are due and overdue. It is extraordinary, in the light of every lesson of recent military history that General Westmoreland should throw away the advantages of vastly superior mobility and firepower and allow General Giap, employing thoroughly familiar strategy, to pin him down in static fortifications along the demilitarized zone...

"How far does the catalogue of ineptitude have to run before our Defense Minister sees 'cause for dismay'?"

Almost without question the U.S. press would have been far more effective and critical if it had not locked itself into the uncomfortable and inflexible position of being virtually an adjunct to the official U.S. Establishment in Vietnam. The press has allowed its news judgment and priorities to be completely dominated by MACV policies and allowed its perspective to be shaped by the scope of U.S. strategy. Most of the press did not realize that when the process began in the mid-1960's and most of the press undoubtedly does not realize that even now. (Nevertheless, that seems to be a fairly accurate assessment of the present state of affairs.) In other words, the press worked almost entirely within the framework of the official U.S. approach to the Vietnam problem while inadvertently renouncing its responsibility to criticize and offer reasonable alternatives. In commenting on the Tet Offensive, one can see from the sample of reactions presented earlier, that the American press confined itself for the most part to analyzing the enemy's objectives, cursing fate and bad luck for the disaster, but on the whole being remarkably reserved in making any criticisms of the U.S. military. Only a rare exception such as Emmet John Hughes was willing to make a judgment and draw any basic conclusions on U.S. strategy and policies from the evidence of the Offensive. Interestingly, Hughes was commenting from the United States. Reporters in the field, on the other hand, were so preoccupied with the momentary events in Saigon, that they seemed devoid of any sense of critical perspective. In many ways the reporting of the Tet Offensive reflects more than any other incident the failure of the press. The average reporter, unaware of his ignorance of the nature of the war or of the current situation, hammered authoritatively away at his typewriter about the "disaster" he thought was occurring. Psychologically, of course, it was a disaster as later events were to confirm. But the egregious, fundamental mistakes made by the U.S. Command at this time were not even suspected by most of the press, let alone reported. From a military point of view, for example, the situation was extremely confused. But nowhere did the press acknowledge that what may have superficially or momentarily seemed to be a defeat of great consequence for the United States could have been turned into a

momentous victory if the opportunity had been seized. Tremendous casualties were inflicted on the enemy as the press did indeed report. What it did not report, however, was that some top military commanders were urging MACV for permission to go on the offensive and pursue the retreating enemy, inflicting still greater (and possibly intolerable) casualties on his already battered forces, only to be forced by the high command to remain in defensive positions. Had a different decision been made the course of the war, and especially the ability of the North Vietnamese to continue the fight, might have been radically effected. It also took the press weeks and sometimes months before it realized that the enemy may have lost more prestige and support among the South Vietnamese people than it gained, by its vicious attacks on the country's main urban centers. Although by that time the American public was naturally preoccupied with other public matters and had lost much of its detailed assessment of the Offensive.

Like the magazines and newspapers, television coverage of the Tet Offensive, and the war in general, had its strengths and weaknesses. The greatest difference, however, was that television concentrated on the dramatic, visual aspects of a story. Television naturally thrived on visual action. Some say it created it, and in many cases permitted its news judgment to be ruled by it. Reporters for the various networks constantly derived the insatiable demands of their home offices for "bang-bang" but they also knew it was the only sure way to make the air back home. A few television executives and correspondents fought the system but in the end they too lost and either submitted to it, worked around it, or departed. Fred Friendly, formerly the president of CBS News, was perhaps the most notable example. Admittedly, there had been a long list of disagreements between Friendly and the CBS, Inc. management before the final parting, but the specific incident which led to his walkout certainly exemplifies television's view towards Vietnam and news coverage in general.

The disagreement was over live coverage of former ambassador George Kennan's testimony on U.S. Vietnam Policy before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Committee's hearings on Vietnam had been going on for several days and each day Friendly found himself in the humiliating position of begging time from the network to preempt regular programming to broadcast the hearings. On the day Kennan was to appear, the highest network executives informed Friendly live coverage would be impossible because of the cost. As Kennan started testifying, Friendly sat in New York watching the hearings over closed-circuit television and became increasingly convinced that Kennan's testimony was so significant it demanded live coverage, regardless of the cost. He also decided that if he was still overruled because of commercial and financial considerations he would quit. His resignation was submitted before the end of the day.

In explaining his reasons for leaving, Friendly argued that television had an overriding commitment to public service and that the medium's impact on the public was so great, decisions involving news judgment could not be left to high-powered executives who had no experience in this area. Friendly had much more to say and none of it made good reading in the offices of the CBS management. Of course, Friendly was not without his

own failings but it might well be argued that few of the executives that followed him at CBS, or at any of the other networks, were as serious or as concerned as Friendly about the Vietnam War. Far too often the network news executives judged their coverage of Vietnam against the performance of their television rivals rather than against the demands of the story itself. So for the most part, television geared its coverage to its own ideas of what the public would watch rather than what the public should be told. The network news executives could certainly have corrected the situation but some of them were simply too far from the scene to appreciate the complexities of the story, some were too unsophisticated to understand, while some simply didn't care. Those executives who did understand were too often powerless to make any reforms or improvements. One network, for example, evidently thought the War was such an easy and undemanding assignment (or just didn't care one way or the other) that it was (and is) notorious for sending its least able correspondents to Saigon. In any event, the "bang-bang" stories made marvelous television and attracted the audiences, which often seemed to be the major objective. In fact, the mania for action footage was so intense during the late 1960's that even some of the senior correspondents were drafted for duty on the front lines in Vietnam where they inevitably found themselves wondering why they were doing the job of a much younger man and why they were not doing the more thoughtful and meaningful pieces commensurate with their experience and talents.

Sir Robert Thompson, the British expert on counter-insurgency, and an adviser to the U.S. Government on Vietnam, recognized the superficial nature of most of the television coverage of the Vietnam War and commented on this in his latest book.

It must be understood that a television camera has very limited vision. It is not always on the spot and even when it is the scenes are open to widely different interpretation. I am reminded of the experience of a friend of mine who was BBC correspondent in the Far East. It was normally his practice to visit trouble spots in a fairly relaxed manner, to interview knowledgeable people on the spot and then to have a quiet look around himself. At the end of this, he would record a short, five-minute objective summary of the situation as he saw it. At the time of the Tet Offensive, however, he was rushed into Saigon with a television cameraman to provide additional coverage. He complained that he was just being dragged around by the cameraman and would probably get shot. He could only comment on the pictures which the camera could take and had little idea what was going on anyway. When he got to Hue and saw American aircraft dive-bombing the citadel still held by the Vietcong, all he could think of saying into the microphone was: 'My God! It's just like watching television!'

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\*Sir Robert Thompson, No Exit from Vietnam (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), p. 9.

The great tragedy is that television, in its better moments, can match the often profound impact of picture with the eloquence of words to provide incomparable insights into any situation. And on occasion television did just that. In 1968 CBS presented a one-hour documentary on the Viet Cong that won several awards and the praise of many experts including Doug Pike. After viewing the film, Pike observed that the film "was one of the best studies of the Viet Cong" he had ever seen. But on the whole, television produced very few of its "finest hours" on the Vietnam War primarily because the "bang-bang" footage proved so ideal for the medium.

Of course, television suffered the same weaknesses as the other media, but in general it seemed to suffer so much more. Limited in air time far more than the print media were limited by space, the reporter barely had time in many cases to provide anything beyond captions for the pictures. Moreover, many if not most television reporters in Vietnam had far too little background in Asian affairs to overcome all the other handicaps of their medium, while some of them had simply accepted the assignment to advance their careers and so their interest in the war itself was minimal. In some respects, that was all that was required. With so little editorial guidance from their home offices except to keep getting more sensational battle stories, most reporters did nothing but follow the big combat units around in the field and usually for only a few days at a time. As a general rule, most television correspondents had little first-hand knowledge of the pacification program and the networks made few serious attempts at providing sustained coverage of this effort. Moreover, few television correspondents had any serious contacts with the more thoughtful members of the Mission who could provide valuable insights into the War. Some senior television correspondents, however, were exceptions to this rule. And on occasion a few excellent reports were filed although this work rarely made prime-time news shows--probably because network executives reasoned "think" pieces were not dramatic enough for American television audiences.

Despite this generally superficial approach to the War, television probably deserves greater attention than the other media because of its undeniably powerful impact on the American public. Vietnam is advertised as television's "first" war and most Americans did indeed depend on the medium for much of their news from Vietnam. It is doubtful, however, whether the public realized how much of the Vietnam story it was missing or whether it really cared. Possibly not. But it is at least open to question whether the course of the War would have been different if the public had been better informed on U.S. policy and programs in Vietnam, the realities of Vietnam, and on the policy alternatives that existed.

The most regrettable and disturbing aspect, however, is not the past performance of the press, but the absence of any real signs of changes or improvements in the immediate future. Sir Robert Thompson even suggests this is more than one should expect, for "an understanding of what is happening in war is not by any means a new problem." Sir Robert added the following:

At the outset the issues of the war were well understood and the United States involvement was strongly supported both at home and abroad. But there has been a complete lack of understanding of the nature of the war and of what has been happening. It has been this, rather than a failure of communications between government and people, which has led to the 'credibility gap'. Confusion has been confounded by the mass media because the weight and diversity of the material which has been inflicted on the individual has been quite beyond his capacity to sift and evaluate. It has merely left an impression that war, and especially civil war, is beastly and must be stopped at all costs. This is not a novel revelation. There is nothing new about the horror and tragedy of the Vietnam war except that it has been exposed to the cameras and brought into the sitting-room. In the past, wars were viewed at long range through dark glasses. When people's views both of issues and events depended on lead writers and on dispatches from a distant correspondent, the involvement was slight but the appreciation clearer. Now all are involved and no one is spared a single detail. This leads to a situation, particularly in the complicated circumstances of a People's Revolutionary War, where a hundred lines of argument can be supported by evidence and can be passionately held with complete conviction. Certainly in the case of Vietnam few have been able to see the wood for the defoliated trees.\*

A very distinguished reporter for one of the major American news organizations who was based in Vietnam for the better part of the decade stated the problem somewhat differently.

The press wasn't the only one that failed. Everyone failed. The whole communications process broke down. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon sentence simply couldn't do the job, it simply couldn't reconcile these two diverse frames of references and systems of values. A sentence written in Mytho for some reason read differently in Saigon and its meaning was even more distorted in Washington, although the words were unchanged. Everything was relative and this is probably a reflection of the great differences between the United States and South Vietnam. An American advisor, for example, who had assimilated into Vietnamese society to some extent had great difficulty being understood by his superiors in Saigon who were operating on a different frame of reference and a different sense of values so you can imagine the communications problem between this same adviser and the officials in Washington. The press faced much the same problem. I think we wrote some intelligent and meaningful reports on the war but it just didn't register.

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\*Ibid., pp. 8-9.



Our editors and the public simply couldn't understand the realities of this war, it was too divorced from their frame of reference. And this is going to happen again, in the Government and in the press.

On the overall performance of the press, I would say it was good, bad and indifferent and for a whole series of interacting reasons. And I don't think it will change. The system will remain and the press will probably do exactly the same with Vietnam next time around, if that happens.

In other words, this experienced correspondent contends that the failure of the press was only one aspect of the failure of the entire American effort in Vietnam and that neither the press effort nor the Government effort can be fully understood one without the other. Of course the press had many failings but its poor performance primarily reflected the inadequacies of the official U.S. Government effort. So that, if the Government effort and policy line had been more effective, more realistic, then the press might have been more successful in its coverage of the War. As it turned out, however, U.S. policy was ambiguous and somewhat confused and thus directly resulted in confusion in the press. And since U.S. priorities were misplaced, that too was faithfully reflected in the coverage by the press. Thus, the press was not much better or much worse than the Government effort it was trying to follow. Without question there were some notable exceptions, but where the press as a whole should have served as an informed observer and thoughtful critic, it too often became an overpowered amplification system for the conventional Government wisdom of the day. Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but it is indisputably clear the press failed because it was simply inadequate to the challenge of providing satisfactory coverage of the Vietnam War.

An example of this was the Mylai atrocity. Almost every reporter knew, or should have known, that such incidents were occurring and yet there were extremely few reports anywhere on this tragic aspect of the war. When asked why his network had failed to publicize such incidents before the Mylai affair was disclosed by the Government, one very capable editor at a national network replied, "We thought we had told the public but it's obvious we never said it loud and often enough." Another judgment was provided by a young writer who is admittedly against the War, but who has also seen as much of Vietnam as any other reporter today in American journalism. He describes not only why the press failed in this specific case but why it failed to provide better coverage throughout the war:

...Few American correspondents I knew and talked to seemed to question the basic assumptions of the war. (This was not true for the foreign press.) There was much written about strategy, body count, the success or failure of an operation, progress in Revolutionary Development, or the stabilizing of the current Saigon regime. But few seemed to be asking, in 1967, if the

whole notion of pacification was desirable or tenable, whether Westmoreland was in touch with the realities of the war, whether Americans should be in Vietnam to begin with. Many correspondents had opinions, complaints, and criticisms, and in private would talk about them. But they would seldom write about them. Like the soldiers, they too, had a job to do for a given period of time. They, too, needed to stay in favor, keep official sources open, and avoid antagonisms between themselves and the military, who were at once their guides and protectors in the field....

Back in Saigon, one is protected, though you could hear and see bombs and flares on the city's outskirts. Here there are many other journalists with whom to drink and gripe. One can very quickly get wrapped up in local affairs. There is either the threat of a palace coup to cover, or a pseudo election overseen by a troop of presidential observers who stand conspicuously but dumbly beside a ballot box and have their pictures taken. There is the Five O'clock Follies in a neat air-conditioned auditorium. There are new operations going out, and myriad press releases from hundreds of governmental agencies, which are distributed from a huge rack at the press office. There are giant new computer schemes to tell us if we are winning the hearts and minds of the people. There are black market scandals, corruption in the Vietnamese government, apathy in the ARVN forces, to be reported. There are students in jail, Buddhists protesting, human interest stories about prostitutes and shoeshine boys adopted by kindly GIs. Most correspondents must file a story of some kind every day. The folks at home want progress reports. If a reporter dug too deeply into official assumptions, the chances were (and probably still are) that his story would be cut or dropped and that he would get nothing but the bitter animosity of the Vietnam military apparatus, upon which he was dependent for future stories, travel, and all the other assistance he needed to keep on top of the news. One correspondent for a Washington paper, with whom I talked upon returning from Quang Ngai, claimed that he knew all about what was happening up there. Yet he wrote little which spelled out the significance of the fact that the US had destroyed two provinces without anyone's hardly noticing it. The correspondent himself seemed unmoved by what he had heard and claimed to know. Perhaps he had seen so much of the same kind of destruction in other areas that it hardly seemed newsworthy.

But even if a correspondent had been horrified by what he had seen and learned of the war, there were few newspapers or magazines that seemed disposed to print such unsettling reports. One Newsweek correspondent told me on returning from Quang Ngai that he was shocked by what was going on in the countryside. Having had experience in Europe during World War II, he said that what he had seen was "much worse than

what the Nazis had done to Europe." Had he written about it in those terms? No.

The press has, of course, on many occasions bravely ferreted out news, despite official resistance. Newsmen have reported examples of ghastly US errors and of cruelty for which Vietnamese civilians paid. But more often than not, incidents of a city destroyed to save it, or a village accidentally bombed, or of torture in government prisons, are portrayed as exceptions to the rule, rather than the rule itself. They are duly regretted, those involved are instructed to be more cautious, and the American public rests assured that they will not be repeated. That, at least, has been the case up to now.\*

As the selection from Schell's piece shows, the problem of the press was not one of personnel but of organization and attitude. Even the best of the correspondents in Vietnam were far too preoccupied with constant deadlines to sit back and reflect. Under this tremendous pressure they understandably had few opportunities for developing anything that approached an objective prospective on the war. In his magnificent work on the Vietnam War, Sir Robert Thompson suggests this obsession with action for its own sake may reflect a basic flaw in the American national character. "There is always an air of bustle in any American headquarters. If anything happens it is essential to do something, frequently without thinking." And despite its tremendous enterprise in covering the Vietnam War, the press often seemed to have acted and written without much serious thought or reflection.

Theoretically, the press is the self-appointed watchdog of the federal government. In this case it was not, primarily because the press somehow overlooked that responsibility in preparing its own order of battle for the Vietnam War. There was no realization, even when the concern existed, that the traditional techniques of the press were simply inadequate to the job. Yet if the problem had been recognized, the great news media of the United States certainly have the resources, imagination, and experience to have conceived a remedy.

One obvious solution for any of the major organizations would have been the creation of a small group of the most talented and knowledgeable correspondents to independently analyze and evaluate U.S. policy in Vietnam. In other words, a miniature think-tank or task force could have been created to devote its entire energies to analyzing American policy in Vietnam and evaluating possible alternatives. This should probably still be done and it is certainly within the means of any of the major news organizations in the United States. These same organizations already have well-staffed research departments to dig out information

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\*Orville Schell, "Pop Me Some Dinks," The New Republic, January 3, 1970.

on Vietnam and other subjects and this proposal only involves carrying this same concept one step further. Several of the major news organizations also assembled special units to evaluate the Warren Report on the Kennedy assassination. In retrospect, it seems absolutely amazing that something similar wasn't attempted on Vietnam. And if the media, especially television, can spend millions of dollars covering the space shots, they can certainly invest equal amounts of manpower and money in examining the Vietnam War. Time magazine, for example, has just introduced a distinguished panel of the nation's leading economists to advise them on economic issues. Surprisingly, nothing along these lines has been done on Vietnam.

Of course, to make any such task force effective, the individual news organizations would have to commit themselves to providing these groups with sufficient opportunities to present their views and the results of their research and investigation.

For practical reasons and to avoid adding to the national confusion, the news media might even consider pooling their resources to create one, or at most two, industry-wide groups consisting of the best men from each of the major organizations, supported by sufficient staff. Given sufficient time and opportunity it is almost inconceivable that such a task force would not make a major, and perhaps unique, contribution to American journalism and the national debate on Vietnam.

